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ASK FOR RONALD STANDISH



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HODDER AND  
STOUGHTON

# ASK FOR RONALD STANDISH

BY  
SAPPER

HODDER AND STOUGHTON  
LONDON

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*The characters in this book are entirely imaginary,  
and have no relation to any living person*

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## PARTIAL SALVAGE

"MY DEAR STANDISH,

"I don't know if you ever ran across Miles Parker. He died about two years ago, and, to everybody's surprise, left practically nothing, for we had all thought he was pretty comfortably off. He was a widower, so the only person affected by it was his son Terence, who was up at Cambridge: a darned good lad, as I think you'll agree when you meet him.

"It was, of course, impossible for him to stop on at the 'Varsity, and since he has no uncles or near relatives, I suggested he should come and make his head-quarters with us, at any rate until he found something to do. But, as you know yourself, jobs are not too easy to come by these days, especially for fellows who have no technical training. And it fridged the lad as month after month went by and nothing turned up: he felt he was sponging on me. At last, however, he answered an advertisement in the paper, and from this point Terence can tell you his own story. I may be several sorts of ass to take up your

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valuable time, but I'd like your candid opinion. I'm not quite easy in my mind.

"Yours sincerely,

"GRAHAM MEREDITH.

"P.S.—Probably wild horses won't make him admit it, but I don't think Terence is quite easy himself."

Ronald Standish passed the letter over to me and turned to the third occupant of the room—a cheery-faced youngster of about twenty-three.

"Well, what's it all about, young feller?" he said with a smile.

"I feel quite ashamed to worry you, Mr. Standish," said Terence Parker. "But Uncle Graham seemed set on it, so I've come along. He's not really my uncle, of course," he added.

"Courtesy title," cried Ronald. "I see. Let's hear about this mysterious job of yours."

"He's told you about my father, I suppose?"

"Yes: I'm wise up to the time when you answered an advertisement."

"Good: I'll start from there," said our visitor. "It was about three months ago, and I was getting desperate. Uncle Graham has been goodness itself to me, but I felt I couldn't go on living with him for ever. And suddenly, one morning, I saw this advertisement in the paper."

He took a cutting out of his pocket and handed it over to Ronald.

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“ Secretary wanted. Must be unmarried man about five feet ten in height : average build. Shorthand unnecessary. Good salary to suitable applicant. Box 231.”

Without comment Ronald put the cutting on the table, and waited for Parker to continue.

“ As you can imagine, I had an answer in the post within ten minutes, and two days later I received instructions to go to a place called Fordham House, near Woking, where I was to interview a Mr. Charles Follitt. I’m afraid I haven’t got the letter with me, as I tore it up when I got the job.

“ I went down at once, and found the house without difficulty. And before I’d had time even to ring the bell the door was flung open and a fellow of about my own age was shown out by an elderly female. He looked a bit glum, so I concluded that he was an unsuccessful competitor, and that the place wasn’t filled yet.

“ ‘ This way,’ mumbled the old dame. ‘ And what’s your name ? ’

“ I told her, and she announced me. Standing on the hearthrug was a man of about fifty. He was swinging a pair of pince-nez to and fro, and as I came in he put them on and gave me the once over. I did the same to him. He was about my own height, clean shaven, and in his way not bad looking. But there was a shifty sort of look in his eyes that I didn’t very much like.

“ ‘ Well, Mr. Parker,’ he said, ‘ you are the thirtieth applicant I have seen. It is incredible how foolish some people are : no less than ten



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of them were married, whilst three of them were at least six feet. You are not married, I take it ? ’

“ ‘ I am not,’ I assured him.

“ ‘ And your height, I can see, is satisfactory. So we will proceed to the other points. Do you live with your father ? ’

“ ‘ My father is dead,’ I told him, ‘ and so is my mother.’

“ ‘ Indeed,’ he said. ‘ You have my sympathy. An uncle perhaps ? ’

“ By this time I was beginning to get a bit stuffy : I couldn’t see what the devil it had to do with him who I lived with. However, I told him quite civilly that my nearest relative was a second cousin whom I’d never seen, and that the man whose house I was in was no relation at all.

“ ‘ Excellent ! ’ he cried, rubbing his hands together. ‘ I, too, am almost alone in the world, and my only relative is a cousin. I feel we shall get on capitally together, Mr. Parker.’

“ I stared at him.

“ ‘ Do you mean you’ve engaged me ? ’ I cried.

“ ‘ I think I may say that you will suit me,’ he answered. ‘ Subject, of course, to one small condition. There may come an occasion, Parker—I don’t say it will, but it may—when I shall have to leave the house, and at the same time let it appear that I am still here. Nothing criminal, I assure you,’ he added with a laugh when he saw me look at him pretty hard ; ‘ it’s merely a family matter into which

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I prefer not to go. What I am getting at is this, however. Should such an occasion arise I should want you to wear some suit of mine and appear just once or twice in the window of one of the rooms facing the road, so that only your back is seen.'

"Well, I must say, Mr. Standish, I thought that was a bit odd, but the money side came in and I agreed.

" 'Splendid,' he remarked. 'Now as to salary. Shall we say five pounds a week?'

" 'That suits me,' I said promptly. 'And what are my duties?'

" 'To start with, I want my library catalogued,' he said. 'And there will be a few letters and things of that sort.'

"At that it was left, and I started work the next day."

"One moment, Parker," said Ronald. "What does the staff consist of?"

"The old woman who let me in, and she goes home every night."

"So you and Mr. Follitt slept there alone. I see: go on."

"As I say, I started in next day, and having provided myself with pens, ink, and paper, I proceeded to tackle the library. And ten minutes' inspection was sufficient to show that the thing was simply farcical. I don't profess to know anything about books, but I can recognise absolute junk when I see it. There were piles of books all over the floor, and shelves full of them, but you've never thought of such a collection. To give you an example, there

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were four copies of that revolting tome, 'Eric, or Little by Little.' There were old books of hymns mixed up with a treatise on spherical trigonometry : there was Mrs. Beeton's cookery tome next door to a table of logarithms. And this is what I was supposed to classify !

" So I interviewed Mr. Follitt and asked him how he wanted me to set about it. And then he told me how he had acquired his collection. Apparently one of his hobbies was to buy up the whole of the contents of a second-hand bookshop in the hopes of finding something good. And what he wanted me to do was to arrange and make a list of anything I thought possible and discard the rest. So I started off on those lines, and have been carrying on ever since. As he was doing the paying, he could presumably dictate the job.

" So much for that side of it : now for the other. After I'd been in the house about four days I was sitting in the smoking-room one night after dinner. Mr. Follitt had gone into the place he called his laboratory, a room which was separated from the rest of the house by a green baize door, and I was alone, when suddenly a most queer-looking customer came in. He still had his hat on, and for a time he stood there looking at me with his hands in his pockets. He was wearing dark glasses and had a ragged-looking black moustache.

" ' Is Charles in his laboratory ? ' he asked in a peculiar hissing voice.

" ' He is,' I said. ' May I ask who you are ? '

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“ ‘His cousin. I suppose you’re the secretary?’

“And it was then I discovered what caused the hiss: his two central front teeth were missing.”

“ ‘Damned foolishness,’ he grunted. ‘What’s he want a secretary for?’

“With which he turned on his heel and left the room. I heard the baize door swing, and picked up my book again with some relief. Mr. Follitt’s cousin was not my idea of a pleasant evening. After a while, however, it occurred to me that they might like a drink, so I walked along the passage and knocked at the laboratory. They were talking inside, but when I tried the handle it was locked.

“ ‘What is it?’ called out my employer.

“ ‘I wondered if you’d like a drink, Mr. Follitt.’

“ ‘No, no,’ he said testily. ‘Go away, Parker.’

“Which I thought a bit harsh: I didn’t care a damn if he had a drink or not. However, to do him justice he apologised handsomely later on.

“ ‘I fear I seemed a little irritable,’ he said, ‘when you came to the laboratory. But my cousin, James Palliser, and I were having a business discussion, and we could not see eye to eye.’

“ ‘Has he gone?’ I asked, for I hadn’t heard him leave.

“ ‘Yes: I let him out by the side door. And, by the way, Parker, whenever he comes

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as he did to-night he always goes straight to the laboratory. And then we never wish to be disturbed.'

"I refrained from saying that so far as I was concerned nothing would induce me to disturb Mr. James Palliser, who had struck me as a positively leprous piece of work ; and any time in the future when he came—and it's been pretty often—I've kept religiously out of his way."

Young Parker paused and lit a cigarette.

"I hope I'm not boring you, Mr. Standish," he continued, "but your sufferings are nearly over. About a week ago my bird came to me and said that the occasion he had alluded to when he engaged me had arisen, and that he wanted me to impersonate him that afternoon. He produced a suit he often wore, and in which I, personally, would not have been seen dead drunk in a ditch. But I'd agreed to do it, and so I put it on.

" 'Show yourself four or five times,' were his instructions, 'but don't be recognised. Also—and this is very important—try and see if anybody appears to be watching the house.'

"Well, I carried out my orders, and after he'd been gone about an hour I found that somebody *was* watching the house. No less a person than Mr. James Palliser. I showed him my back view two or three times, and in between kept an eye on him through the curtains. He was passing and repassing the house, and kept lingering by the gate and peering in. And finally I'll be damned if he

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didn't stop a passing policeman and have a talk with him, evidently about the house, for the copper peered in too. Which struck me as pretty rum : what on earth could a policeman tell him with regard to the place or its occupant that he didn't know already? In fact, the more I thought of it the more extraordinary the whole thing grew. He'd seen what he thought was his cousin inside, and therefore he must have assumed that his cousin had seen him. So what sense was there in popping about outside the gate like an agitated hen?

"I told Mr. Follitt, of course, as soon as he got back, and, to my amazement, he appeared to have expected it.

" 'I'm not surprised, Parker,' he said. 'You think you bluffed him into thinking it was me?'

" 'I think so,' I answered. 'But the whole thing seems so pointless.'

" 'Not if you knew the facts of the case,' he told me. 'A matter of business, my boy, and one thing I can assure you. It was imperative that James Palliser should believe I was here the whole afternoon.'

"And with that he went off to his laboratory, leaving me to wonder what was at the bottom of it all. It's all so queer, Mr. Standish. This so-called work I'm on is complete bunkum. I gave him two long lists and he never even glanced at them. I'm convinced he bought all those books merely as a pretext for giving me something to do."

"That," agreed Ronald, "is fairly obvious. Has he paid you regularly?"

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"Every week," said Parker. "And that's another point. He's a mean man—very mean : at times one literally doesn't get enough to eat. So why pay a ludicrous salary for absolutely useless work ? "

"He isn't," answered Ronald. "He's paying a ludicrous salary in order to keep you in the house. And the point is, why is he doing so ? Has anything happened since you impersonated him ? "

"Nothing, except that another avalanche of 'Eric's' has descended on me," said the youngster with a grin.

"Does he know you've passed all this on to Meredith ? "

"No : but he's never told me to keep it dark. What do you make of it, Mr. Standish ? "

"Frankly, my dear fellow, I don't make anything at all of it at present. It's an odd story, but odd things happen in this world. Clearly his sole object is to have a man in the house who is of right build to impersonate him at a distance. Equally clearly Mr. James Palliser would appear to be the audience for the impersonation. But why ? What the relations are . . . By the way, what are their relations ? How do they get on together ? "

For a moment or two Parker stared at him.

"Do you know, Mr. Standish," he said slowly, "it's a most extraordinary thing, and it's never struck me until this moment. I've never seen 'em together. I've heard 'em talking, but I've never actually seen 'em together."

"Hasn't Palliser ever stopped for a meal ? "

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"Not on your life. Old Follitt is far too stingy. It takes one back to one's old school days when one went and gorged at the tuck-shop. Hashes and muck of that sort every day. Says his teeth hurt him."

"Well, Parker," said Ronald after a pause, "the situation as I see it is this. You're getting a fiver a week and the run of your hash. I don't like this impersonation business at all, but it may be only a family matter, in which there's no harm in it. You are old enough and ugly enough to take care of yourself, and my advice to you is to hang on drawing your fiver and to keep your eyes skinned. And the instant anything occurs which you don't like—hop it. You know my address, and a line here will always get me."

It was a fortnight before the next development took place, and this time it was Mr. Graham Meredith who came to see us.

"Look here, Standish," he burst out even before the door was shut, "I wish you'd give me your advice. You remember young Terence, don't you? Now would you put that boy down as being a thief?"

"A thief!" echoed Ronald. "Most certainly not. Who says he is?"

"His employer—Mr. Charles Follitt," cried Meredith indignantly. "I was in my garden this morning when a man I'd never seen before drove up to the house. He turned out to be Mr. Follitt, and the first thing he said to me when he found out who I was left me gaping. 'Naturally I can't employ him any more,' he



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said, 'but if he lets me have the money back I'll say no more about it. Perhaps I was to blame in leaving it lying about.'

" 'What the deuce are you talking about?' I cried.

" 'Hasn't Terence Parker come back here?' he asked.

" 'He has not,' I said. 'Why should he? Isn't he still with you?'

" 'He went to bed as usual last night: he did not appear this morning. And his bed had not been slept in. In fact, he's gone. And I'm very grieved to have to tell you, Mr. Meredith, that a hundred pounds of my money has gone also.'

" 'You mean to say,' I cried, 'that you're accusing young Terence of stealing a hundred pounds of yours. Because I don't believe it.'

" He shrugged his shoulders.

" 'I can hardly believe it myself,' he said. 'Nevertheless, the fact remains that the notes have gone, and so has he.'

" 'What about the servants?' I cried.

" 'I have only one woman who comes by the day, and she wasn't there yesterday or to-day. It's a shock, I know,' he went on. 'It was a terrible one to me, because I liked him. But I really can't afford to lose a hundred pounds.'

" 'The instant I am satisfied that Terence took your money,' I assured him, 'I will send you a cheque for that amount.'

" And with that he departed. What do you make of it, Standish? I'd stake my whole reputation that that boy is no thief."

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"I agree," said Ronald. "And yet this man Follitt would hardly dare to make such an accusation unless he had good grounds for believing it. Have you heard nothing from Terence?"

"Not a word. I got quite a cheerful letter from him about three days ago, and that's the last I've heard of him. But nothing," he reiterated, "will make me believe that boy is a thief."

"Well, Meredith," said Ronald, "I'm extremely sorry for you. But it seems to me that there's nothing to be done except to wait and hear his side of the story. From what Mr. Follitt told you he's not going to call in the police, and that is something, at any rate. Because, however innocent he is, police inquiries are always unpleasant."

"An unexpected development, Bob," he remarked when Mr. Meredith, still vehemently protesting that the thing was outrageous, had gone. "He struck me as being a remarkably nice youngster."

"You think he took the money?" I said.

"If he didn't, the whole of Mr. Charles Follitt's story is a lie. And why should he lie? What is his object? The fact that young Parker has disappeared can easily be verified. And if for some reason or other they've had a row and Follitt wants to get his own back, he'd make his accusation of theft as public as possible. He wouldn't go to Meredith, as he did do, and announce his intention of keeping the whole thing quiet."

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"And yet I don't believe that youngster would steal," I said.

"Sudden temptation. A hundred quid is a lot of money. May have been betting, or something of that sort. And yet I agree with you. Let us put on our considering caps, Bob. Let us try and evolve a solution, which would cover the facts as we know them, based on the assumption that young Parker is not a thief, and that therefore Follitt is lying."

"Thank you kindly," I said, "for the little word 'us.' I, personally, am going round to the club to have a drink."

He joined me there at lunch, and I asked him what luck he had had.

"None," he answered. "I've tried three possibles, but each of 'em fails on one point or another. You remember our assumption—that Follitt is lying. That being so one fundamental fact emerges. If young Parker did not take that money, but just quit the job after a row, Follitt would never have dared to go to Meredith with a cock-and-bull yarn about stealing. He would naturally have assumed that Parker would have got there before him. Am I right so far?"

"Yes," I said. "You are."

"Let's go a step farther. Follitt did go to Meredith, therefore he *knew* Parker could not get there before him. How could he know that *unless young Parker has not disappeared?*"

"You mean . . ." I began.

"I mean this. If Follitt is lying, that youngster is a prisoner somewhere. And I can

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think of no more likely place than the house itself."

"But what's the great idea?" I cried.

"I can think of two or three, Bob," he said gravely. "Are you on for a visit on the quiet to Fordham House?"

"Of course," I answered.

"Because I think we'll go after lunch. Mr. Follitt does not know either of us."

We found the house without difficulty, and strolled casually past it. It was a smallish place, standing back from the road, and there was no sign of life in any of the rooms.

"I'm going to take the bull by the horns, Bob," said Ronald. "It's acted before: I'm travelling in linoleum. You keep out of sight."

He produced a bundle of samples from the car, and walking up to the front door, he rang the bell. But a few minutes later he had joined me again.

"No answer," he remarked. "Which may or may not mean the house is empty."

"What are you going to do now?" I asked. "Because it rather points to Follitt's story being true."

"I know it does. And yet . . . Look here, Bob," he said suddenly, "it's not fair on you . . . You go back to Town."

"What the devil are you driving at?" I cried. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to wait till it's dark, and then have a closer look."

"I'm with you," I said resignedly. "We'll ask if we can share the same cell."

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We put through the afternoon somehow, and then had dinner. But it was nearly eleven before Ronald deemed it safe to start. We left the car some way from the gate, and then stood in the shadow reconnoitring. The house was in darkness, and in the faint light of the moon that came filtering through the fir trees it seemed that all the windows were shut.

"Come on," whispered Ronald. "It's now or never."

He climbed the gate and I followed him, creeping along the grass verge that bordered the drive. The trees were creaking slightly in the breeze, and our footsteps made no sound, as we skirted round to the back of the house. This, too, was in darkness, and with infinite care we approached one of the windows. The curtains were drawn, but when one got close to, a faint glow came from inside. It was the dying embers in the kitchen grate.

And then I began to sniff, and Ronald put his lips to my ear.

"Smell it, Bob?" he breathed. "It's paraffin. I'm breaking in."

Came a sharp crack as he used a peculiar implement of his own on the catch, and cautiously lifted the bottom window. And the next moment we both recoiled involuntarily: the place literally reeked of paraffin.

"Something wrong here," he muttered, and switched on his torch. "My God! Bob," he cried, "look there!"

I could scarcely believe my eyes. Sprawling in a chair, his mouth and chin covered with

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blood, was young Parker. Stacked up around him was a mass of shavings and paper, whilst at his feet was an overturned lamp. And the floor was swimming in paraffin.

"The devil!" snarled Ronald. "The foul devil! Come on, Bob, though I'm afraid we're too late."

And then he gave a cry of triumph as he reached the youngster.

"Not dead, Bob; not dead. Only insensible."

And as we carted him to the window something fell with a tinkle on the floor. I picked it up: it was a plate of six false teeth.

We laid Parker down on the grass and turned the torch on him. He was breathing deeply and regularly, but his mouth was a shocking sight. And Ronald examined it more closely.

"What's happened to him?" I said.

"Six teeth hauled out," remarked Ronald softly. "May heaven have mercy on Mr. Charles Follitt when I get hold of him. Let's get Parker to the car, Bob: then we will come back and await the gentleman."

But that was not to be. Hardly had we got the youngster in the car when a sudden blaze of light shone through the trees from behind us. We could hear the roar of the flames and see the smoke pouring out of the house.

"Just in time, Bob," said Ronald, even more softly. "Mr. Charles Follitt will not return to-night. It did not occur to me that he was so well versed in scientific arson. We will now go to the police station, and doubtless in time

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we shall be able to return his bona-fide false teeth."

"To Mr. Charles Follitt," I remarked.

And Ronald's reply was enigmatic.

"A rose by any other name," was all he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

I suppose I was dense, but even then the truth did not dawn on me. That Mr. Charles Follitt had deliberately set fire to Fordham House by means of some incendiary device timed for a certain hour was obvious. Further, that he had intended the wretched Parker's charred body to be mistaken for his own was also clear. He had been thorough, too. Realising that he himself had false teeth, he saw the impossibility of leaving a corpse that had not: he had therefore extracted six of the youngster's and left the plate of false ones to be found. The fact that it did not fit could never be discovered after the fire. Also he had spun the only story to Graham Meredith which would account for Terence Parker disappearing: the disgrace of having taken the money would prevent the boy going back to the man who had treated him so well. His insistence on his secretary not having any near relatives who might make awkward inquiries: all the details of the plot were clear, save the one crucial one. What was his motive? Why did he want the world to think he had been burned to death?

It could not be a question of insurance, either fire or life. If he was supposed to be dead,

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claiming the money became a little difficult. And then Mr. James Palliser began to loom up in my mind. He might help there. As the only relation he would inherit anything his cousin might leave, and he would be in a position to claim the insurance money. Then, after a decent interval, he could join Follitt abroad and split the cash. A risk on Follitt's part, undoubtedly: he was putting himself completely at Palliser's mercy. And since, from what Parker had told us, there was friction between the two men, the risk seemed a large one. However, that appeared the only possible solution, and I said as much to Ronald, who smiled.

"The swine will lie doggo for a bit," I remarked, "and then get out of the country."

"Think so, Bob? Well, we'll see. Anyway, to make him easy in his mind I have persuaded the Inspector to put up a little mild deception. Here it is."

He tossed over a sheet of paper, and I read the contents.

"Fordham House, near Woking, the residence of Mr. Charles Follitt, was completely gutted by fire in the early hours this morning. It is feared the unfortunate owner perished in the blaze."

"A nice little paragraph for the newspapers," he remarked, "which may help matters. And now all we can do is to get Parker back to Meredith's house and make him as comfortable as possible."

The youngster recovered consciousness the



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next day, and for a time, as was only natural, he seemed completely dazed. His mouth was hurting abominably; the teeth had been wrenched out in the crudest way. And even when he could speak coherently all we got out of him was that he had felt queer at lunch and after that remembered no more.

"That's when Follitt drugged him," said Ronald. "He was in the house when Bob and I called, and probably Follitt was, too."

"I'm very anxious to meet Mr. Follitt again," remarked Meredith quietly.

"And so you shall," said Ronald. "In the very near future."

"But, damn it," I cried, "the man is pretending to be dead. He's not going to show his nose anywhere."

"An even fiver, Bob," he grinned, "that with the help of Mr. James Palliser we lay our hands on him within the next few days."

"You mean Palliser will split," I cried. "What a precious pair of blackguards they are."

To be exact, it was three days later that Ronald rang me up.

"If you want to be in at the death, old boy," he said, "come round to the office of the South British Insurance Company in Pall Mall at midday."

I went there, to find the Inspector I had seen at Woking, with Ronald and a stranger who proved to be one of the directors of the company.

"You were quite right about the insurance, Bob," said Ronald. "Follitt had insured his life for thirty thousand, and his house for five

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against fire. And Mr. James Palliser is coming shortly to claim his cheque. Will you and the sergeant wait in the next room, Inspector? We don't want to alarm our bird. And we may have to use unpolice-like methods."

He arrived almost immediately, and I must say I have seldom seen a more peculiar-looking man. He was dressed in black, and as he greeted us the two missing teeth were most noticeable.

"Mr. James Palliser, I believe?" said Ronald. "Please sit down."

He took a chair, and one could see his eyes blinking behind the dark glasses.

"A terrible affair," he remarked. "Terrible."

"I see from the policy in which you are mentioned a next-of-kin to Mr. Follitt," said Ronald, "that you live near Birmingham."

"That is so," said Palliser. "I have had a house there now for two years."

"But you frequently visited your cousin at Woking?"

"Frequently. And he came to see me. Not during these past few weeks, but before that he was often a visitor."

"You have been to his house quite a lot recently, I believe?"

"Four or five times, I suppose. To be frank, we have not been on quite such friendly terms of late. A private matter, connected with a lady on which we did not see eye to eye."

"You know he had engaged a secretary, don't you?"

"I do. I met the young fellow on two or

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three occasions. But my cousin telephoned me—let me see, it was actually the day of the fire—that he'd decamped with some money."

"Most fortunate for him he wasn't involved in the fire too," remarked Ronald. "Did you know, Mr. Palliser, that when your cousin engaged him he made the peculiar condition that his secretary must be prepared at times to impersonate him?"

Mr. Palliser sat forward.

"I did not," he said. "Impersonate him! Then that accounts . . ." He leaned back and sighed. "However, my cousin is dead. Let us not speak ill of him. It is the private matter I mentioned. One day when I thought he was at Fordham House, it must have been his secretary I saw. Poor Charles!"

He sighed again, and put his finger tips together.

"I suppose you couldn't tell us the name of the lady," said Ronald.

"Really, sir! What possible bearing can it have on the case?"

"I thought that perhaps she might like a little memento of your cousin," answered Ronald blandly.

"But I understand that the house was completely gutted."

"There is always partial salvage, Mr. Palliser," said Ronald, still more blandly.

And to my utter amazement he produced from his pocket the set of false teeth and put it on the table in front of him.

But if I was surprised the effect on Mr.

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Palliser was electrical. A hoarse sort of gurgling noise came from his throat and he plucked at his collar with both hands.

"You seem upset, Mr. Palliser," continued Ronald, and his voice was no longer bland. "Strange, isn't it, that these teeth show no signs of the fire."

"I don't understand," stammered the other. "What have my cousin's false teeth to do with me?"

"That remains to be seen," remarked Ronald. "I was going to suggest that if the lady would not like them they might come in handy for you. Your own seem sadly wanting."

Mr. Palliser rose from his seat as Ronald approached him.

"Don't touch me," he shouted. "Don't dare to touch me."

And what happened then was, as Ronald had said, not strictly police-like.

"Hold his head, Bob," snapped Ronald, and in a second the transformation had occurred. Off came the moustache and glasses: out came a set of false teeth with the centre ones missing.

"Now, Mr. Charles Follit, you ineffable blackguard, you can put in the complete set or not, as you like."

"Mercy!" screamed the wretch. "I . . . I . . ."

"Did you show mercy to your secretary?" cried Ronald. "Luckily we got him out in time, which unfortunately saves you from the gallows. Take him away, Inspector."

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Attempted murder and arson should keep him happy for some years to come."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You were very nearly right, Bob," he said to me later. "At first that was my solution, and then the incredible risk of Follitt putting himself completely in the hands of a distant cousin, with whom he was not even on the best of terms, ruled it out. Inquiries were made, of course, and, sure enough, a Mr. James Palliser was found to have a house near Birmingham, where he'd been for two years. He, too, had one old woman who looked after him, and from her we found out that he was frequently away for a month at a time. Then we went to Mr. Charles Follitt's servant and discovered that he, up to the time young Parker went to him, also indulged in these long absences. And it was then that I saw the immense significance of the fact that Parker had never *seen* 'em together. Heard 'em, yes—but not seen 'em.

"The whole thing was an elaborate and carefully planned plot to make Palliser a reality. When Follitt was not in Woking, Palliser was in Birmingham. And vice versa. Follitt, realising that there is nothing so noticeable about anyone as missing teeth, had two plates made, from one of which he removed two conspicuous ones. That also had the effect of making him speak with that peculiar hissing intonation. And when Parker heard them, as he thought, talking to one another, it was

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Follitt talking to himself and changing the plate each time. As I say, just a carefully thought-out scheme to allow Mr. Follitt to be burned beyond recognition, and then draw the insurance money as Mr. Palliser. For the fact remains, Bob, that if we hadn't been in time and young Parker had been burned to death, the evidence of Follitt's dentist as to the false teeth would have been conclusive.

"You shall now stand me lunch and I'll let you off the fiver."



## 2

### THE SILENT VICTIM

PETERSDOWN TOWERS was a large, rambling, old-fashioned house lying in the heart of West Sussex. Elizabethan, it was one of the few places where the Virgin Queen was not reputed to have stayed the night, though Sir James Ardingley, the fourth baronet—if rumour was to be believed—had not been displeasing in that august lady's eyes. The grounds were extensive: the shooting good without being first class. And, like most houses of similar size to-day, its capacity for absorbing money was incredible.

The existing baronet, Sir Hubert, had long discovered that annoying fact. As a captain in the Guards he found it increasingly difficult to combine his expenses with his income; the property seemed to be an inexhaustible sink for cash.

And yet nothing would have induced him to part with it, even if he could have found a purchaser. Sooner or later, it being bred in the bone, he would go back to the home of his forefathers, till in the fulness of time he was buried alongside them in the family vault. And



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until that day arrived who could look after the old place better than his uncle, William Ardingley? A blood relation, reared in the house himself, he loved it as if it was his own. And if sometimes his demands seemed extravagant, they were in a good cause.

William Ardingley was a man of fifty-five, and owing to a rather strange chain of circumstances he had spent fifty of them in Petersdown Towers. His elder brother John, Hubert's father, had come into the title when he was twenty, and the two of them had lived together till John married ten years later. Of that marriage two children were born—Hubert and, a year later, his brother Philip, who was now a lieutenant in the Navy. And in giving birth to Philip, Lady Ardingley had died, leaving her husband with the two infants.

For three years he carried on alone, though her death had very nearly broken him up. He had idolized his wife, and small wonder; a more lovely girl it would have been difficult to find. And the mere thought of replacing her never even entered his head. But after a while the loneliness began to tell, and he suggested to William that he should come back again.

William had been agreeable, and for another three years the two brothers joined forces. Then came the next tragedy: Sir John was killed in a motor accident and his son, aged four, became the baronet. Very naturally William, after consultation with the family lawyers, stayed on in *loco parentis*, until Hubert came of age, when the two of them discussed

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the matter at length, though the upshot of the matter was a foregone conclusion.

Hubert, though he adored the place, did not want to bury himself in the heart of the country for many years to come. Philip was in the Navy: Hubert was an Ensign, and though money was getting tighter there was still sufficient and more than sufficient for Hubert in his regiment, and a good allowance for Philip. So William remained on, ostensibly as agent, though practically as owner, and the two boys came down when they wanted to and leave permitted.

Such then, in brief, was the state of affairs in the Ardingley family during the years that followed the war. And such might have been the state of affairs to-day but for the terrible tragedy of last July. It is only after careful consideration, and fully discussing the matter with Ronald Standish, that I have decided to put on record the real facts. And though these words may never see the light of print, it will at any rate be something to have the truth available, in view of the mass of malicious rumour that still surrounds the whole affair.

It was on Eclipse day at Sandown—I remember that Ronald and I had argued as to whether we should go or not—that the story starts. We had decided not to and were just going in to lunch at the club when we ran straight into Hubert, who joined us at our table.

“Heard the latest?” he asked us as we sat down. “Uncle William has gone batty.”

“What’s the matter with him?” said Ronald

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studying the menu. "He was quite normal the last time I saw him."

Hubert laughed.

"So he seemed to me until he told me the news. My revered uncle is going to be married. Can you beat it?"

"Really!" said Ronald. "I must say that is a bit of a shatterer. I'd have put him down as one of the most bullet-proof bachelors I've ever known. Who's the lady?"

Hubert's grin faded, and I regret to state that his answer might have led one to suppose that our discussion concerned a kennel.

"She's the daughter of a retired doctor who has settled down in the neighbourhood," he continued. "By name of Plessey—Violet Plessey. She's a good looker for them who likes her type, but she's just about as hard as they make 'em. However, that's old William's funeral. As things stand he's running round in small circles eating out of her hand."

"How's this going to affect you, Hubert?" I asked.

"That's just the point, Bill," he answered. "Quite a lot, I'm afraid. One thing is certain: it will mean a complete change of our present *régime*. And that is always annoying."

"You mean you don't want the lady at Petersdown Towers."

"Just so. Even if she was one of the brightest and best it wouldn't be satisfactory. I shall probably do likewise myself some day, and by that time they'd be thoroughly settled in. Besides, there may be some little Williams.

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No—anyway it wouldn't do, but in this case it is out of the question. Nothing would induce me to have Miss Violet Plessey in the house, though I'm not exactly relishing the idea of letting her know same."

"Does she expect to stop on?" asked Ronald.

"I really don't know, old boy. So far I have held no converse with the lady on the subject. Nor do I propose to. It will have to go through Uncle William, and I'm afraid it is going to be a bit of a pill for him to have to uproot after all these years. Still, if he will go plunging into matrimony he can't hold me responsible."

"He'll probably suggest remaining on till you plunge yourself," I said.

"Well, he ain't going to, Bill. As a matter of fact, though this is between ourselves, apart altogether from this marriage I'm afraid there would have had to be a change. Things are so tight these days that I don't see how I can stop on in the regiment. It means I've got to keep a show going here in London, and my tastes have never been exactly of the ginger beer type."

"Still, if he wasn't getting married, he could have stayed on with you," remarked Ronald.

"Sure thing. We get on damned well together. Look here," he said, struck with a sudden idea, "are you two blokes doing anything this week-end? If not, why don't you come down with me and give me your moral support. You know the links, and there are always some bunnies."

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"I'd like to, Hubert," said Ronald. "What about you, Bill?"

"So would I," I answered, and Hubert got up.

"Good," he said. "Come round to my place at four. I shall be interested to get your reaction to the fair Violet."

And so it transpired that at half-past five we rolled up to the massive doors of Petersdown Towers to find Walters, the old butler, waiting to receive us.

"This is a bit of a surprise, Walters," said Hubert as we got out.

"You mean about Mr. William, Sir Hubert. It is indeed, sir."

He turned away, and Hubert gave us a wink. Quite obviously Walters shared his master's opinion of the lady. And yet, when we met her shortly afterwards with William Ardingley, my first impression was favourable. She was of medium height, and her figure was superb. Good-looking too in a rather flashing style, and evidently determined to make a good impression on Hubert, who was going through the usual formalities of congratulation.

Then a third person appeared on the scene, and a glance at his face showed where he fitted in. The girl's likeness to him was obvious, but I found myself wondering whether he had given up doctoring or doctoring had given him up. The water shortage, so far as his diet was concerned, could not have affected him greatly.

Father and daughter went off shortly after to change, as they were returning to dinner,

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and we four men went into the billiard-room for a drink. Through the windows one could see the great stretch of rolling park, leading up to an avenue of magnificent copper beeches. In the foreground lay the lake, and on its surface floated two graceful swans with cygnets in attendance.

The home of the Ardingleys for centuries : assuredly Hubert was right. To leave it all after fifty years was not going to be an easy matter. And even as the thought crossed my mind I heard William speaking about it.

"I think I've found the very house that will suit us, Hubert," he was saying, and I glanced at the baronet. His face was expressionless, but one could sense his profound relief. To have the thing settled voluntarily by his uncle was more than he could have hoped for.

"Of course you will stop on here as long as you like, Uncle William," he said.

"Thanks, my dear boy. If I may I will stop till it is ready. It will be a bit of a wrench leaving here after all these years, but one can't have everything. Well—I must write a couple of letters before dinner."

He paused as he reached the door and looked at Ronald.

"You fellows know, don't you, about the dog ? He lives near the stables and he's on a chain. Don't go near him, whatever you do."

"Rollo," explained Hubert as the door closed behind his uncle. "A mastiff the size of a donkey, and the most savage brute you can imagine. Uncle William and one of the grooms

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are the only people who can touch him. Like a game of anything? ”

We played slosh till it was time to dress, and at eight o'clock we sat down to dinner. Two other people had come in, and I found myself sitting next to Violet Plessey.

There was no doubt about it: she was an extraordinarily good-looking girl. I admit that it did strike me—though I am a child over women's clothes—that she was a little overdressed for such a small party, but the fault was excusable. She was on Hubert's left, and once again she went out of her way to be charming to him. Sensing, as any woman would do, that he did not like her, she seemed determined to break down his prejudice, and towards the end of the meal she had succeeded, at any rate so far as appearances went. Once I saw William looking at them, and wondered if he was wise to his nephew's feelings; then an interminable story by the doctor on my other side necessitated some semblance of attention.

“ I hear Mr. Ardingley has a house in view,” I said to the girl when Hubert turned to the woman on his right.

“ Yes,” she answered. “ A sweet little place. We shall be terribly poor, you know.”

I murmured some conventional reply: actually that aspect of the case had not struck me. In my thoughts I had got no farther than the fact that William would have to leave Petersdown Towers, but now that she mentioned it I realised the financial side as well. Though the revenue from the estate had been

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entirely Hubert's since he came of age, his uncle had to a great extent enjoyed the benefits of it, as much as if it had been his own. He had lived rent free and food free; he had had no servants' wages to pay. And now all that was going to stop.

"It is about ten miles from here," she continued. "I do hope William won't miss this too much."

"He's been here a long time," I said.

"He adores the place," she answered in a low voice. "Positively adores it. Sometimes I think . . ."

But what she thought I was not to know, for at that moment Hubert stood up, glass in hand, and in a few words proposed the health of the happy couple. The doctor emitted a porty heart throb anent his little girl, and we all drank to their future prosperity. After which she again monopolised Hubert, and the doctor continued the history of his life.

Strange as one looks back now on that evening, how difficult it is to remember anything of interest. I suppose that it is because it was such a perfectly ordinary evening that there are no pegs which stick out. I remember that Philip was mentioned: I remember Hubert saying that there would be no difficulty about his coming to the wedding as he was only stationed at Invergordon.

I remember, too, that of all strange subjects the conversation came round to walking in one's sleep, and William asking Hubert if he ever did it now.



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"You and Philip," he said, "were very bad at one time."

Which naturally the doctor, being that manner of man, found irresistible, and bet that Hubert had not given it up by a long chalk, it being a most convenient malady at times. It was then that I began to dislike the doctor actively, and to realise that if there was anything in heredity Hubert might be right about the girl.

But apart from those two things I remember nothing, because as I said before there was nothing to remember. The guests departed about eleven; half an hour later we all went to bed, Hubert in particular stating that he was most infernally sleepy.

I was not, and for quite a while I sat beside my open window, smoking. It was a pitch dark night, overcast and warm. Ronald and I had adjacent rooms in the west wing, and I could hear him moving about as he went to bed. At last he drew back his curtains and I saw his shadow outlined in the square of light on the ground below.

"Night, night, Bill," he called out, and at that moment we both heard it. Rising and falling in a hideous cadence there came from the other side of the house the deep-throated baying of a hound. Twice, three times; then we heard it no more.

"The Pekinese seems excited," he said. "I think there's going to be a storm."

His bed creaked: his light went out, but still I sat on feeling strangely awake. An owl was hooting mournfully and occasionally a little

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eddy of breeze made the leaves rustle in the trees near by. Save for that—silence: a brooding, oppressive silence.

Suddenly lightning began to flicker in the distance followed by the muttering of thunder. It was a long way off, and I was just wishing that it would come over us to cool the air when a very vivid flash lit up the grounds. And there, standing under a tree on the other side of the drive, was a man. I could not see his features, or anything else about him; all I knew in that instantaneous exposure was that someone was there.

For a while I debated whether I should wake up Ronald; a man in the garden at that hour of the night was probably up to no good. And then there came another flash; there was no one there. The nocturnal visitor had gone, and I began to wonder whether my eyes had deceived me in the first instance. At any rate it settled the question of arousing anybody; to look for someone outside on such a night would be like searching for the proverbial needle in the hay. And so, after one final cigarette, I switched off the light and turned in.

A hand on my shoulder awakened me, and I sat up blinking. Daylight was streaming in at the window, and Ronald, his usually ruddy face chalk white, was standing by the bed. Outside people were moving about, and instinctively I glanced at my wrist-watch. It was half-past five.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Hubert is dead," he answered in a shaking

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voice. "He's had his throat torn out by the mastiff."

Too stunned to reply I could only stare at him foolishly, and wonder whether I was dreaming. Then I got out of bed and pulled on some clothes.

The servants were standing about in little huddled groups as we went downstairs to the hall where William Ardingley was speaking to a groom. He turned round as we came up and in the early morning light his face looked ghastly.

"My God! Standish," he said. "I can't believe it. I simply can't believe it. It was Rogers here who found the poor boy."

And so we heard the story. Rogers, looking out of his window, had been appalled to see a sprawling figure in pyjamas lying on the ground near the mastiff's kennel. Blood was all over the place, and he could tell at a glance that the man was dead. He had rushed down and pulled the body out of the hound's reach, and then to his horror he had realised it was Sir Hubert.

"Let's go and have a look," said Standish quietly, and I followed him outside to the stables. In one corner stood the kennel, and on the ground covered with some sacks lay the dead man. And he was a terrible sight. His throat was torn and gashed in the most dreadful fashion, and the jacket of his pyjamas was saturated with blood. It had, of course, ceased to flow by that time, but an ominous pool near the kennel showed where the unfortunate baronet had met his end. His feet were bare,

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and I thought of the conversation at dinner. Obviously he must have been walking in his sleep.

"Do you mean to say, Rogers," said Ronald as the groom and William Ardingley joined us, "that you heard nothing at all?"

"Not a thing, sir. But a mastiff kills mute."

"It doesn't follow that the victim is mute too," answered Ronald.

"Well, sir, I heard nothing," said the groom stubbornly.

"Where is the dog now?"

"I've shut him up in his other kennel."

Ronald gently replaced the sacks over the dead man.

"What a ghastly tragedy, Mr. Ardingley. As you say, one can hardly believe it."

"To think that I should actually have alluded to sleep-walking last night. And then for this to happen. Get a hurdle, Rogers, and carry Sir Hubert into the house. I must go and telephone for a doctor: the death certificate will have to be signed."

He went indoors, and Ronald and I, with a last look at the motionless figure, turned away.

"It's amazing, Bill," said Ronald after a while. "And the more I think of it the more amazing does it seem. That Hubert came here in his sleep is easy to understand: there have been cases of people walking miles in that condition. But being killed by an animal is not an instantaneous death. So why on earth didn't he wake up while it was happening and yell the place down?"

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And it was at that moment I remembered the man I had seen standing under the tree. I told Ronald about it and he stopped and stared at me.

"You're sure of that?" he said.

"Positive," I answered. "Though I don't see that it can have any bearing on the matter. It might even have been Hubert himself."

He walked on slowly with a deep frown on his forehead.

"Why didn't he wake, Bill? Why didn't he wake?"

Again and again he harped back to the point, and when I suggested that possibly he had, and that Rogers had slept through his calls for help, he shook his head irritably.

"It's unthinkable," he cried. "A man who is being mauled to death by a hound would wake the dead."

We had come to a corner of the stable yard, where some rabbits blissfully unconscious of the tragedy were having their morning meal.

"Wake the dead," he repeated, as he stood watching them absent-mindedly.

"He evidently didn't wake Rogers," I retorted, feeling a little irritable myself. It certainly was strange, but the bald fact remained that that was what had happened. And that being so there was no more to be said about it.

"Terrible thing about the poor young master, sir."

Another groom had joined us, and Ronald nodded.

"Ghastly," he said. "Where do you sleep?"

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"That's my room up there, sir."

He pointed to a corner of the building.

"And you heard nothing in the night?"

"The only thing I heard, sir, was a rabbit squealing. I reckons a stoat had got 'un."

And then a puzzled look came over his face; he was staring at the hutch.

"Well, that be main queer. Where be Susan, the old doe? She were here last night. Couldn't have been her I heard, for the stoat couldn't have got her out through the wire, and she'd have been dead inside there."

He scratched his head and recounted the rabbits.

"Five," he said. "And Susan not there."

He looked at us rather as if he thought we had abducted the lady. And somewhat to my surprise I noticed that Ronald seemed interested in this triviality.

"Do you look after them?" he asked.

"I feeds them, sir—yes."

"And there were six there last night and only five this morning?"

"That's right, sir. Susan's gone. Knows her name, she does. Follows me like a dog across the yard. Susan! Susan!"

But no Susan appeared, and the groom departed still calling for her.

"The somnambulist who didn't wake; the unknown man who watched the house; the rabbit that vanished." Ronald lit a cigarette thoughtfully. "Are they three disconnected facts, Bill, or . . .?"

He fell into a brown study, and after a time

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I left him and went indoors. I knew the futility of speaking to him when he was in one of those moods. In the hall William Ardingley was talking to a stranger, whom I placed correctly as the doctor, and leaving them together I went upstairs to complete my toilet.

Ronald I could see walking down by the lake evidently sunk in thought. And much as I liked him I could not help a certain feeling of annoyance over his attitude. The whole thing was tragic enough as it stood without making a mystery where no mystery could exist. What was more likely than that the mastiff, with the first snap of his jaws, had severed Hubert's jugular vein, and that to all intents and purposes death had been instantaneous? That would account for no sound having been heard.

It was the view that was taken by the doctor, who had completed his examination by the time I came down again. He was on the point of leaving and William Ardingley was standing by his car.

"There will be a few formalities, Mr. Ardingley," he was saying. "In view of the circumstances the police will have to come into the affair, and they will doubtless order the dog to be destroyed. But beyond that the whole thing is obvious. Sir Hubert was walking in his sleep, and unfortunately got within reach of the mastiff which killed him. The oppressive weather last night may have made it more savage. Once again—my deepest sympathy."

He drove off just as Ronald came up, and a glance at my friend's face told me that he was

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still not satisfied. But when he spoke to our host there were no signs of it in his voice.

"You will naturally want us to clear out, Mr. Ardingley," he said. "As we came down in Hubert's car perhaps we could have one a little later to take us to the station?"

"Of course, Standish. Whenever you like. But from what the doctor says there may be some police formalities. Had you not better wait for them?"

"I hardly think it is necessary," said Standish. "Should they require to see us, or ask us anything, we can easily come down again. By the way, where have you put the body?"

"In the gun-room," said Ardingley. "It is still on the hurdle."

We walked indoors and our host went into the study leaving us in the hall.

"What about that man I saw," I remarked. "Oughtn't I to mention him?"

"Everything in due season, Bill," he said gravely. "And this is the wrong one. I am either talking through my hat, or this is one of the most amazing crimes of modern times. Come into the gun-room."

I followed him unwillingly: I had seen enough of that poor mangled body.

"Have you a large clean pocket handkerchief?" he asked, as he pulled back the sheet with which the dead man was now covered.

Completely mystified I produced one. And then, to my amazement, he carefully removed the blood-stained handkerchief from Hubert's



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pyjama pocket and wrapped it up in mine. Then he replaced the sheet.

"No one is likely to notice that it has gone," he said quietly, and without another word he led the way from the room and went upstairs.

The house, of course, was completely disorganised. Not that it mattered much, for no one could eat any breakfast when it did arrive. And at ten o'clock the car came for us and we started for the station. It was about four miles away and half-way there we met Violet Plessey driving a small two-seater. She stopped at once and we got out to speak to her.

"William has just telephoned through to me, Mr. Standish," she cried. "I simply can't believe it."

"It is only too true, I fear, Miss Plessey," said Ronald.

"Walking in his sleep. How ghastly. Do you think he suffered much?"

"As he didn't call out I should think not at all," said Ronald, and a look of relief spread over her face.

"That would have been too dreadful," she cried, and with that we left her.

"An enigmatic young woman," said Ronald as we resumed our drive. "She and William should get on well."

"What are you driving at?" I demanded.

"Even without the suffering it strikes me as being too dreadful," he answered.

We arrived in London just before one, and Ronald at once dashed for a taxi, leaving me to take our kit in another.

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"Wait for me at the club, Bill," he said.  
"I may be a couple of hours."

It was nearly three to be exact before I saw him again, and I knew at once that further developments had taken place. Never have I seen him look so stern as he did when he sat down beside me.

"So I was not talking through my hat, Bill," he said.

"Where have you been?" I asked.

"To the laboratory of the Middlesex Hospital," he answered.

"And what have you found out there?"

"That the most cold-blooded murder I have ever come across in the whole of my career was committed at Petersdown Towers last night."

"Good God!" I cried. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I have done already, as I came in. I've put through a long-distance call to Philip at Invergordon. I couldn't get him, but I left an urgent message with one of his brother officers that Philip is to get in touch with me the instant he comes back to the ship."

"But can't you arrest the murderer now?"

"As I've often told you, Bill, there's a lot of difference between knowing and proving. I propose to let the murderer arrest himself."

"Who is he?"

"Need you ask? Mr. William Ardingley. He was the man you saw standing under the tree last night. He was waiting for your light to go out. And all I'm wondering is to what

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extent Miss Violet Plessey is concerned with the matter."

I felt a thrill of horror run through me: the thing seemed too monstrous to be possible. And yet I knew that Ronald was the last man on earth to make a statement of that sort unless he knew it was true. But when I asked him for further details he shook his head.

"All in good time, Bill," he remarked. "You'll know by to-morrow night at latest."

The hours passed and he grew more and more fidgety.

"Why hasn't Philip telephoned?" he said. "The officer I talked to said he'd gone ashore early this morning and was expected back at any moment."

And then at last a page appeared to say that the call had come through and Ronald went to the box.

"It's all right," he said when he returned. "It's the same bloke I talked to before. Philip has had a wire from his uncle telling him of Hubert's death, and he's left in a car to catch the night mail farther south. He's given him my message, and so he'll be round to see me to-morrow morning before he goes to Peters-down Towers. And that being so there's nothing more we can do at present."

The evening passed with maddening slowness, and though I tried to play bridge I was quite unable to keep my mind on the cards. Hubert murdered—and by his uncle! I simply could not get it out of my head. It seemed like an incredible nightmare. And so it was to the

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intense relief of my partner that I refused to play another rubber and rose from the table just before eleven to see Ronald come rushing into the room like a man distraught.

"Come, Bill. Hurry, for God's sake. Never mind your hat."

He hurled himself into his car which was outside the door, and I fell in beside him. And that run will linger in my memory while I live. He drove like a madman, and how we were not killed a dozen times I do not know.

"Had another call from Invergordon," he shouted above the roar of the car. "Man who motored Philip just returned. . . . He missed train and chartered aeroplane. . . . And he's flown direct to Petersdown Towers. . . . Tried to get him on the 'phone. . . . Line out of order. . . . Pray Heaven we're not too late. . . ."

The sentences came in jerks as with screeching brakes we skidded round corners.

"Never forgive myself. . . . Last thing I anticipated. . . . Have you got a gun? . . . Of course you haven't . . . I have. . . . There's the house."

The lodge gate was open, and we roared up the drive. The place was in darkness, but suddenly in the light of our headlamps there came a sight which froze the blood in my veins. Fifty yards in front of us by the corner of the stable a huge dog the size of a donkey was standing over something that lay on the ground. And even as we watched it shook something savagely. Then, alarmed by the lights, it lifted its great head and stared at us. We could see

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the huge slaving jaws, the heavy jowl ; could see all its hackles come up as we ran towards it shouting. And then shot after shot into its skull from point blank range, till it sank down dead on top of Philip.

Men were appearing from everywhere as we pulled him out. His throat was torn, but he was still breathing though unconscious. And at that moment William Ardingley came on the scene.

"What has happened ? " he cried in a shaking voice.

"Another case of sleep-walking," said Ronald quietly. "And this time a rabbit would not have been necessary, you . . . murderer."

The last two words seemed to pierce the night. A deathly silence settled on the group of servants, and for a space in which a man may count ten William Ardingley faced his accuser. Then with a quick movement he lifted his hand to his mouth, and a few seconds later his dark soul had passed before another tribunal.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was many days later before Philip was fit enough to sit up and talk. His throat was still bound up, and he looked weak and ill, but all danger of blood-poisoning was past.

"Explain things, Ronald," he said. "What made you suspect my uncle ? "

"What I couldn't understand, Philip, as I said all along, was the absence of noise. A man can do the most amazing things when he walks

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in his sleep, but it's not difficult to wake him, though it may be dangerous. Therefore it seemed impossible to me that poor old Hubert had been sleep-walking. What, then, had he been doing? That he had walked there in pyjamas when awake was equally out of the question. So it boiled down to the fact that he must have been taken there. Now he couldn't have been taken there while conscious; therefore he must have been drugged, and drugged so heavily that he would not wake even though he was being mauled by the mastiff.

"Then came the extremely interesting point about the rabbit. How had it escaped? The groom was positive it was there over-night; it was not there in the morning. Now a bizarre fact of that sort may be intensely important. He had heard a rabbit squealing, and had put it down to a wild one caught by a stoat. But to me it started another line of thought, which, though it seemed preposterous at first, was no more preposterous than the sleep-walking theory. And so I took Hubert's handkerchief to a laboratory to have a test made.

"You know, of course, that there is a radical difference between human blood and the blood of animals or birds when viewed under the microscope. And I found, not altogether to my surprise, that the blood on the handkerchief was *not* human blood but might easily have come from a rabbit. And that one point established, it became clear that your brother's death was no accident, but plain murder."

Philip stared at him.

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"It may have been clear to you," he said, "but it certainly isn't to me. Why on earth should there have been rabbit's blood on the poor old chap?"

"Because your uncle had made one big mistake. When he drugged Hubert he gave him too much and actually killed him. And then, having dragged his body within reach of the mastiff, he found the dog wouldn't touch it. No hound will touch a dead man. Which must have been a pretty nasty moment for Mr. William Ardingley. The whole of his carefully thought out scheme had gone west. There was Hubert dead on the ground, and the mastiff refusing to do his bit. So your uncle had to do it instead. He gashed up Hubert's throat with a knife—I didn't mention it at the time, Bill, but the marks didn't look to me as if the dog had made them—and once again found himself in a quandary. Your brother being dead the blood would hardly flow at all. So he got a rabbit and, having wounded it, let the blood run over Hubert. It was then the groom heard it squealing."

"The infamous old swine!" cried Philip.

"Not a nice piece of work," agreed Ronald. "However, it was obvious you would be the next victim. He would then become the baronet, and remain at Petersdown Towers. So I got through to you. I meant to put you wise over anything you might eat or drink—by the way, how did he drug you?"

"It must have been in a whisky and soda I had just before going to bed," said Philip.

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"Probably. However, I was going to get you to pretend to be doped, and to allow him to drag you towards the kennel, when the police would have appeared on the scene and the case was complete. And then to my horror you came here before seeing me. By Jove, Philip, I've never had such a nerve-racking drive in my life! And I give you my word I could have shouted for joy when I saw that brute worrying your throat: it proved you were alive. But whether your uncle had purposely given you less, or whether you stood the same dose better than Hubert we shall never know."

"Supposing Hubert hadn't been dead when the hound smelt him," I said. "What then? The blood would have been human."

"True, Bill. But you can take it from me that even had that been the case Philip would not have spent his first night here alone. I just couldn't swallow that sleep-walking explanation, though it would have been infernally difficult to *prove* it was wrong."

"Amazing he should have the nerve to try it twice on successive nights," said Philip.

Ronald shrugged his shoulders.

"The murderer's mentality is a curious one," he said. "Mark well—it had to be done quickly; he couldn't in ordinary decency have kept that mastiff on here for long after it had apparently killed Hubert. And he probably thought he had a fool-proof scheme. No one suspected him over Hubert; why should they over you? The tragedy had preyed on your nerves; what more natural for anyone at all



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addicted to walking in his sleep than to visit the scene of it? Touch and go, Philip, old lad; another two minutes and the title would have passed again. Though if it is any comfort for you to know, I can assure you the next holder would have been hanged as high as Haman."

"By the way," said Philip, "the Plesseys, *père et fille*, have departed suddenly."

"It isn't too easy to get dope," remarked Ronald quietly. "And old Plessey was a doctor. One wonders."

### 3

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"ONE of the most extraordinary cases I have ever encountered, Bill," said Ronald Standish to me. "And since a lady, who has, as yet, not appeared in it officially, is coming to consult me on the matter shortly I'd like to run over the facts, so far as they are known, before she arrives."

We were seated in his rooms in Clarges Street early one morning in June. I had been out of London for some weeks, and was therefore out of touch with things. So I had no idea of the case he was referring to, and told him so.

"I am alluding," he continued, "to the death of Charles Sinley outside the lift on the top floor of a block of flats in Carimer Terrace. Now it will be of great assistance to me to give you the story up to date: not only in order to get your reaction but also to get things in sequence in my own head.

"Carimer Terrace, as you know, lies north of the Park. It consists of a row of those large houses in which, during the Victorian era, wealthy lawyers and stockbrokers used to live. Not fashionable, but the houses were big and

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comfortable, requiring a large staff to run them. Of late years they have fallen quite out of favour, and several of them have been converted into service flats. And it was in number nineteen that the tragedy happened three days ago.

"The top floor flat, which is the only one we are concerned with, is rented by a man called Raymond Tranton. He is thirty-seven years of age, a bachelor, and of independent means. Apparently he does nothing for a livelihood, and is very fond of the ladies. He dabbles mildly in art, and outside of that his only hobby appears to be things electrical.

"On the night in question he was throwing a small party, which on this occasion was eminently respectable. There were present Lady Graddon and her daughter; a Mrs. Vrowson and her husband, and a friend of Miss Graddon's called Mary Baxford.

"It was a warm night, and the windows were wide open. The time was half-past ten, and the wireless was relaying an opera from Cologne. Suddenly there came a sound of an explosion, and they all looked up. It seemed close to, and was the sort of noise a backfire in an exhaust makes. Or it might have been a gun. . . .

"Tranton, who was standing by the door, opened it and peered out.

"'What the devil was that?' he said, and walked along the passage, leaving the others still in the drawing-room.

"He went to the front door, and a few moments later was back with an ashen face.

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“ ‘Vrowson,’ he cried, ‘for God’s sake come. Will you ladies please stop here.’ ”

“Major Vrowson—he’s a retired soldier—rose at once and accompanied his host outside the flat. And there close by the front door, and opposite the entry to the lift was the sprawling body of a man. He lay face downwards, and a pool of blood had formed on the floor round his head. Beside him was a double-barrelled twelve-bore.

“Very gently they turned him over and then Tranton gave another exclamation of horror.

“ ‘Good heavens!’ he muttered. ‘It’s Charlie Sinley. What on earth can have happened?’ ”

“The poor devil was a horrible sight. Half his face was shot away, and it was obvious at a glance that he was dead.

“ ‘You know him?’ said Vrowson stupidly.

“ ‘Of course I know him. He must have stumbled over something coming out of the lift and shot himself.’ ”

“ ‘Where is the lift?’ said the Major.

“ ‘It goes down automatically when the door is shut,’ said Tranton. ‘My God! this is awful. We must get the police at once, and not touch anything till they come. Go to the women, there’s a good fellow, and don’t let ’em come out here. I’ll get on to the police station.’ ”

“So Vrowson returned to the drawing-room, and Tranton did the necessary telephoning. And ten minutes later the police arrived, during which time Tranton had been busy getting a room ready for the body.

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"(As you will note, Bill, I am piecing the evidence at the inquest together in narrative form to make it clearer for you.)

"Inspector MacAndrew, an extremely shrewd man, was in charge, and he at once began his investigations. The double-barrelled gun was found to contain one used and one unused cartridge, so the cause of death was obvious. One barrel was dirty, the other was clean, and that settled that. And then the inspector noticed a lot of fragments of coloured china lying about on the floor, which he picked up and carefully stowed away. After which he ordered his men to move the body into the flat, and having rung up the doctor, he proceeded to question the members of the party.

"It was a mere formality, since obviously none of them could tell him anything save that they all heard the shot, and after taking their names and addresses they were permitted to go.

"MacAndrew then interrogated Tranton, but he could throw no light on the matter either. He said that he knew Sinley very well, and that Sinley frequently came to his flat. They both belonged to the same club, and that very evening he had had a cocktail with him there. He had told Sinley he had a few people coming in, and had suggested that he should drop in too if he cared to. And that was positively all he could say. The thing was a complete mystery.

"It seemed evident that death had been caused by a barrel going off accidentally as he got out of the lift. But why Sinley should have

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been wandering round London with a loaded twelve-bore in his possession was absolutely beyond him. He was a keen shot, and a good shot, which made it all the more mysterious. It was possible he had been bringing round the gun to show Tranton, but why he hadn't brought it in a gun case was simply inexplicable. And since the poor devil was dead the reason had died with him.

"Then came the inquest at which all that I have told you came out, with one more fact that made the whole thing even more bizarre. With infinite care MacAndrew had pieced together the fragments of coloured china. And though there were several missing, what remained formed part of a grotesque-looking mask.

" 'What do you make of that?' asked the coroner.

" 'I can only conclude, sir,' answered MacAndrew, 'that Mr. Sinley was wearing this mask as a joke. Had he been merely holding it in his hand, it would have fallen on the floor and we should have found all the pieces close together. As it is many of them were not there, and the others were widely scattered about.'

" 'So that the shot went through the mask?' continued the coroner.

" 'Exactly, sir,' said the inspector, and on that a verdict of accidental death was brought in."

Ronald lit a cigarette.

"So there you are, Bill; and I think you will

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agree that it is the most extraordinary case. Why should a presumably sane man, and one who is a good shot, carry a loaded sporting gun in London? Why—another small thing which I forgot to mention before—was he not in evening clothes?"

"What had the porter below got to say?" I asked.

"He goes off duty at ten, so he doesn't come into it. The entrance is deserted from then on."

"Has any taxi-driver come forward?"

"No. But there is nothing strange in that. Sinley lived in Merridew Terrace, which is the next street. He would therefore almost certainly have walked."

"Carrying a twelve-bore?" I cried incredulously.

"Just so," said Ronald. "It is amazing. But so far as I can see there is no other explanation that fits the facts. Suicide is out of the question: why should a man who wanted to commit suicide put on a china mask and do it outside a friend's flat?"

"Murder?" I suggested. "Isn't it possible there was somebody outside the door of Tranton's flat who shot him as he got out of the lift: left the gun beside him and then calmly went down in the lift himself?"

"I'd thought of that, Bill," said Ronald. "Anything is possible in this impossible case. But think of the difficulties. In the first place it wasn't certain that Sinley was coming at all, though it is conceivable he might have said he was to somebody who wanted to kill him. And

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then that somebody proceeds to run the appalling risk of taking up his position, with a loaded gun, outside the door of Tranton's flat through which at any moment the party might emerge. It's possible, but it's darned unlikely. No : on the data in *our* possession at the moment accident seems the only possible solution. It may be that when"—he consulted a letter on his desk—"Miss Sheila Darby has said her piece we shall think otherwise."

"And who is Miss Sheila Darby ?"

"I don't know. Her letter merely states that she is coming round to see me in connection with this affair. And, if I mistake not, here she is."

The front door bell rang, and a moment or two later Bates ushered in a girl of about twenty-five. We both rose.

"Miss Darby, I assume," said Ronald with a bow. "May I introduce Mr. Leyton ?"

He pushed forward a chair and I studied our visitor. She was distinctly pretty, with fair, auburn hair and blue eyes which showed traces of recent tears. She was dressed in black, and there was a ring on her engagement finger. So it was not difficult to see where she fitted into the picture. Obviously the dead man's fiancée, and I waited with interest to hear what she had to say.

"Cigarette ?" said Ronald, offering her his case.

"No, thank you," she answered. And then she burst out suddenly : "Mr. Standish, you *must* do something. That verdict is all wrong."



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"Take your time, Miss Darby," said Ronald quietly, "and tell me all about it. Why do you think the verdict is wrong?"

"Because Charlie and that brute Mr. Tranton hated one another like poison," she cried.

Ronald leaned forward in his chair.

"The devil they did," he said softly. "But Tranton in his evidence said that Sinley was a friend of his. Called him Charlie."

"Lies: all lies. Raymond Tranton may have called him Charlie, but that was the extent of their friendship."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I was engaged to Charlie, and . . ."

She hesitated a moment and Ronald smiled faintly.

"And Tranton was not pleased. I see."

"He's worried my life out for years," she continued, "and I loathe the man. Mr. Standish, I know that verdict is wrong."

"What do you suggest it should have been?" asked Ronald.

"Mr. Tranton murdered Charlie," she said fiercely. "I know it."

"Come, come, Miss Darby," said Ronald gravely, "that's a very serious accusation to make in view of the proven facts. When the shot that killed your fiancé was heard, Tranton and five other people were in the drawing-room. You mustn't make wild statements of that sort, you know: it won't do any good."

"I don't care," she answered stubbornly. "I know I'm right. How he did it, I don't know. And that," she added fiercely, "is

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what you have to find out. Mr. Standish," she continued earnestly, "I know you must think I'm letting my feelings run away with me, but I beseech you to listen to me. Knowing Charlie as I do"—she gave a little dry sob—"did, I tell you the thing is impossible. Going about with a loaded gun is amazing enough; but that Charlie, being on the terms he was with Mr. Tranton, should have proposed to go into his flat with an idiotic mask on his face, I cannot and will not believe."

"It certainly seems very strange, Miss Darby," agreed Ronald. "Even stranger now that you tell me what the relations were between the two men."

She clenched her hands together fiercely.

"It isn't strange, Mr. Standish: it is impossible. Charlie would *never* have done such a thing."

"Still, Miss Darby, one must go on facts, mustn't one? I admit that the only ones I know are those that came out at the inquest. But it is absolutely certain that at the moment the shot was fired Tranton was in the drawing-room with the door shut."

"I know: I know. But still . . ."

"I suppose you didn't see your fiancé earlier that night? I was only trying to see," he continued when she shook her head, "if by any chance we could verify Tranton's statement that he asked him to look in that evening. Find out exactly what he said . . ."

"That's another point, Mr. Standish," said the girl. "I can't swear that Charlie *never*

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used to go to his flat, but to imply, as Mr. Tranton did, that Charlie was frequently there was false. He wasn't: that I know."

"So we arrive at one new and significant point, Bill," remarked Ronald thoughtfully. "Tranton, for some reason or other, wished the world to think they were friends, when they weren't. Why, unless . . ."

He fell silent, drumming with his fingers on the desk, while we both stared at him.

"What do you want me to do, Miss Darby?" he said abruptly.

"Go and find out the truth," cried the girl with her eyes blazing. "*I know Charlie didn't kill himself accidentally.*"

"Bless her darling heart," said Ronald a few moments later, when the door had closed behind her. "It doesn't seem hard enough, does it, Bill?"

He was pacing up and down the room, his hands thrust deep in his pockets.

"It does throw a new light on the thing—that they were enemies not friends. But how does it help? How does that alter the main incontrovertible fact that Tranton was in the drawing-room with the door shut when the shot that killed Sinley was fired? It is impossible that that is not true. If it were a lie five perfectly respectable people have committed perjury, and connived at murder. No: no: that *must* be true. I wonder if there would be a chance of getting hold of MacAndrew. He's a good fellow, and through him it might be possible to have a look at the scene.

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Though what . . . Good Lord! talk of the devil . . .”

In the doorway stood the bulky form of Inspector MacAndrew, holding a small suit-case in his hand.

“My dear Mac,” he cried, “what fortunate chance brings you here? I was just talking about you.”

“And I’ll lay a shade of odds you were also talking about what has brought me here—the Sinley case,” answered the inspector.

“You win,” said Ronald. “There’s whisky on the sideboard, and tell me why I am thus honoured.”

“Entirely because of your last visitor—Miss Darby.”

The inspector splashed some soda into his glass and sat down.

“I want to know, Mr. Standish, if you’ll be good enough to tell me what she has said to you.”

Ronald raised his eyebrows.

“It’s rather an unusual request,” he said. “At the same time I don’t think anything she said can be regarded as confidential. But fair play is a jewel. If I tell you, will you let me in on the whole thing?”

“I will,” answered MacAndrew.

“I score on it,” laughed Ronald. “Because what she told me is merely feminine intuition. In short, she was engaged to Sinley.”

“I knew that,” said the inspector. “That is why she has been shadowed. She was marked down here, and I came along at once.”

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"She was engaged to Sinley," repeated Ronald, "and the fact did not please Mr. Tranton. He has apparently been badgering her for years to marry him. So—and this is the only piece of news I can give you—Tranton's pose of friendship with Sinley is a lie. So much for hard tack. As for intuition, she is certain that the verdict at the inquest was wrong, and that it should have been one of murder against Tranton."

The inspector puffed thoughtfully at his cigarette.

"This is one of the most baffling cases, Mr. Standish," he said at length, "that I have ever handled. You may have guessed that everything did not come out at the inquest?"

"I thought it possible," grinned Ronald.

MacAndrew picked up his suit-case, and put it on the desk.

"I have here," he said, "the china mask which the papers have been so intrigued about."

We bent over him eagerly as he gently undid the wrappings, and placed it on the blotter. It was a strange looking object with a big jagged hole in the centre. Coloured fantastically, it represented the face of a gargoyle from which the nose and part of the mouth were missing. At the top a small triangular piece of metal enabled it to be hung on a nail. The bits had been seccotined together, and the whole effect was grotesque.

"Examine it, Mr. Standish," said the inspector, "but for heaven's sake handle it gently."

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Ronald picked it up and studied it through a magnifying glass ; then with a shrug of his shoulders he put it down again.

" I confess I see nothing here which controverts the evidence we've heard. And yet there must be something. I can see you chuckling, you old devil. Wait a moment . . . "

He turned the mask over so that the inside white surface was uppermost. And the next instant he gave an exclamation.

" Great Scott ! " he cried. " So that's what you mean. D'you see, Bill ? "

He was pointing to a faint black smear which stretched all round the jagged hole.

" Sorry to be so dense," I said.

" The scorching of the powder, boy," he cried. " So the gun was let off from *inside* the mask, and not from the outside."

" Good man," said MacAndrew. " I thought for once I'd caught you, Mr. Standish. As you say, the gun was discharged from the inside, and therefore Sinley cannot have been wearing the mask."

" Even so, Mac, I don't see that that helps much. In fact if anything it makes it easier. He was taking it round to show Tranton. He wasn't wearing it, which was the one thing Miss Darby refused to believe. By some extraordinary accident the gun went off ; the shot passed through the mask and hit him in the head. As I see it, it strengthens the case for the verdict."

Without a word the inspector replaced the mask in his suit-case ; then with twinkling eyes he picked up his drink.

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"Possibly," he said. "Possibly. So now I will come to my second little surprise: the extraordinary phenomenon of the finger-prints on the gun."

"What was extraordinary about 'em?" asked Ronald.

"There were none."

We stared at him blankly.

"None!" said Ronald.

"None. And, Mr. Standish, the dead man had no gloves on."

"Good Lord! Mac—this beats cock-fighting," cried Ronald.

"I'm going to beat it still further," cried the inspector triumphantly. "On the mask you've just been examining there were finger-prints. On the big bit up by the hook."

"Whose were they?"

"That I don't know. But they were *not* Charles Sinley's. And"—he paused impressively—"they were made after it was broken. They point towards the hook and not away from it."

"Well, I'm damned," said Ronald, getting up and going to the sideboard. "This requires alcohol. What do you make of it, Mac?"

"That the verdict was wrong. That someone murdered Sinley. That, in view of what Miss Darby has told you, that someone was Tranton. But how he did it I have absolutely no idea."

"Then, my dear Mac, the sooner we have an idea the better. If between us we can't solve the matter we'll go into the country and grow tomatoes. Can we get into Carimer Terrace?"

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"We can. Very fortunately Mr. Tranton is staying with friends in the country."

"Then," said Ronald, "we might avail ourselves of his absence." He rang the bell. "Bates—a taxi."

\* \* \* \* \*

A small crowd of morbid sightseers was standing round the door as we drew up, though it was now three days since the tragedy.

"Can't get rid of 'em, sir," grumbled the irate hall porter, touching his cap to MacAndrew. "Though wot the 'ell they think they're going to see, I dunno."

"I'm going up to Mr. Tranton's flat, Johnson," said the inspector. "We think something may have been lost out of Mr. Sinley's pocket when he was carried in," he continued, winking at Ronald. "Can you lend me the master key?"

"Certainly, sir," and thus armed we proceeded up in the lift.

"Grossly irregular," said the inspector with a chuckle. "But there are times when one must take the law into one's own hands."

The lift stopped and we stepped out on to a narrow landing about four feet wide. On our right was a big window overlooking Carimer Terrace, whilst immediately in front of us a small pane of glass which could not be opened was let into the wall.

"That," said the inspector, pointing to it, "is the window of the cloak-room in Tranton's flat."

Close beside it, and about a foot to the left



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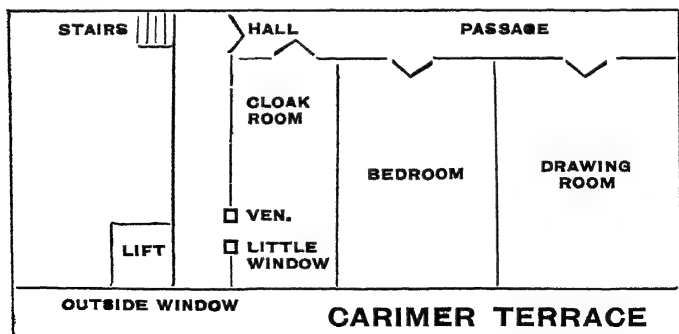
was an open ventilator covered with the usual metal grille; and two yards more to the left was the door of the flat facing the top of the stairs.

"The body," said the inspector, "was lying with the head towards the lift and diagonally across the landing. The gun was by the right side; the bits of china were scattered all over the place, but no fragment was more than a yard from the body. Now, if you'll come inside, Mr. Standish, you can get the lay-out of the flat: then you can put on your thinking cap."

He opened the door and we entered a small hall. In front of us ran a passage, and the inspector led the way along it.

"This," he said, pointing to a door on the right, "is the room in which the body was put. And this," as we came to the next one, "is the drawing-room, in which the whole party was sitting when the shot was fired. With the door shut," he added.

"Draw a rough sketch, Bill," said Ronald,



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as he studied the room. "Get your measurements approximately right. Now look here, Mac," he continued, "let us sum up so far as we have gone at the moment. The absence of any finger-prints on the gun is conclusive proof that Sinley didn't bring it with him."

"Practically conclusive," agreed MacAndrew.

"Then someone must have placed it beside him after the shot was fired, and that someone was wearing gloves, or using a pocket handkerchief, to prevent his own finger-marks appearing."

"Agreed," said the inspector.

"Since the finger-prints on the china are not Sinley's it is clear that he didn't bring the mask either. And as the prints on the china were made *after* it was smashed, it seems a fair assumption that whoever put the gun there touched the china. The fact that there are prints on one and not on the other could be accounted for in many ways. He was flustered and replaced his handkerchief in his pocket after arranging the gun; then for some reason he picked up this one broken bit of the mask with his bare hand."

"Quite feasible, but far from proven," said MacAndrew. "Still we can take it as a working hypothesis. But who fired the gun, because he must be the man who did the rest? Unless we assume a confederate. And if I'm not going dippy that lets out Tranton. You can't fire a gun through a door and round four corners. Apart altogether from the audience."

"Come, come, Mac. Many a gun has been

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fired when the stock has not been against a man's shoulder. No one is suggesting that the shot was fired from this room."

"Well, where was it fired from?"

"Obviously somewhere near the lift. That's our hunting ground. Come on."

I followed them to the landing outside, where for a quarter of an hour Ronald prowled about muttering to himself.

"Must have been a place to which Sinley would certainly go . . . About his own height. . . . He wouldn't be stooping . . . Not cloak room window or glass would have been broken . . . Not . . . Hullo! Hullo!"

He whipped out a magnifying glass and focused it on the plaster above the ventilator. Then with a match he began probing gently.

"Mac," he cried, "come here. There's been a nail in this plaster. And the hole has been filled in recently. It's still soft. And, ye Gods, man—look at this." His voice was vibrating with excitement. "The top of this ventilator is scorched. The shot was fired through there."

MacAndrew was equally excited.

"But—how, man—how?"

"Steady," said Ronald. "Don't let's go too fast. The nail. Supposing the mask had been hung over that ventilator? Supposing Sinley, his attention caught by such a bizarre object on the wall, stopped a moment to examine it, and at that moment the gun was fired? Does that meet it?"

"Yes—but . . ."

"Wait a moment. Just supposing—does

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that meet it ? The mask was hit from the inside and shattered. Sinley was killed. The big bit of china attached to the nail did not come off the wall. The man who placed the gun beside the body saw it and took it off himself. What about it, Mac ? ”

“ But who fired the gun ? ” persisted the inspector stubbornly.

“ The murderer,” grinned Ronald. “ Let’s consider that later. Does that meet it, so far as it goes ? ”

“ So far as it goes, I suppose it does,” admitted MacAndrew cautiously. “ In fact I believe you’re on the right track. There’s no doubt the top of the ventilator is scorched ; and there’s no doubt a nail has recently been removed from the plaster. But we’re still a long way from home, Mr. Standish. Are you suggesting the murderer was in the cloak room the whole time ? For that again lets out Tranton, at any rate, as the actual murderer.”

“ Supposing the gun had been previously fixed in position and was fired electrically ? ”

“ How would he know when to fire it ? ” demanded MacAndrew. “ He was in the drawing-room.”

“ Arrangement of mirrors,” said Ronald tentatively.

“ But the door was shut, man. The drawing-room door was shut. You can’t see through walls.”

“ Supposing he’d fixed up some system of wires,” persisted Ronald, “ by which he could know in the drawing-room when the lift reached the top ? ”

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"You mean ring a bell, or show a light? Think of the risk. All his guests would have heard it or seen it, and then immediately after there's a shot, and a man is killed. Besides think of the practical difficulties. I'll give you that he can play about with his electrical gadgets as much as you like inside his flat, even to the extent of firing the gun electrically, and no one will be any the wiser. But not outside in a public passage. A thing like that can't be fixed up in a minute. . . . What are you grinning at?"

"Mac—we're being too clever. I've got it, Bill—go downstairs, and come up in the lift. Mac—come back to the drawing-room with me."

They went into the flat, closing the door behind them, and I descended the stairs. Then I went up in the lift, and sent it down again.

"Hoyo!" I called out. "Let me in."

The door opened slowly, and I saw Ronald looking distinctly crestfallen.

"Not a sound," he said glumly. "I expected to hear the damn thing, or at any rate the gate shutting. But not a sound."

"And we weren't talking," remarked MacAndrew. "He had a party, and the wireless going into the bargain."

"Couldn't you hear anything at all?" I asked.

"Not the hint of a whisper," answered Ronald. "It's absolutely silent. And yet, Mac, we *must* be on the right tack: we *must*."

Once again he studied the ventilator and the nail mark above it.

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"It all fits," he went on. "Look, you can even see that that metal grille has been recently moved. There's a fresh scratch on the plaster. We're hot, Mac; we're hot. Don't you think so yourself?"

"I do. But how did he know when to fire?"

"You'll admit, won't you, that *if* he knew when to fire he could have done it from the drawing-room?"

"Ye-es. I'll admit that."

"Therefore that is what the problem narrows down to. Assuming for the moment it was Tranton, how did he know when to fire? Mirrors—out of the question: a system of wires on the lift giving some signal inside the flat—possible, but I admit very dangerous; the noise of the lift—nothing doing. What is left? Damn it, you fellows—surely three sane men can hit on the solution between 'em?"

He was walking restlessly up and down the room as he spoke. Tastefully furnished, it left no doubt in one's mind that Tranton was a man of means. Even the wireless was of the super type that combines itself with an electric gramophone capable of playing a dozen records on end, and mechanically I switched it on. Somewhat to my surprise nothing happened, and looking inside I saw that one of the valves was missing. And I had just mentioned the fact when there came the sound of a key in the front door; Raymond Tranton had unexpectedly returned. Undeniably the situation was awkward, as he stood in the passage staring at the three of us.

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"May I ask to what I owe the pleasure of this visit?" he remarked coldly. "Johnson told me you were here. I was always under the impression that a warrant was necessary before you entered a man's house. I presume you have one, Inspector?"

"I have not," said MacAndrew calmly. "But we had reason to believe, Mr. Tranton, that a very vital paper had been dropped from Mr. Sinley's pocket when he was carried in here, and we assumed you would have no objection to our looking for it."

"Indeed! And who are these two gentlemen?"

"Friends of Sinley's," said Ronald promptly. "What a sad affair."

Tranton's eyes narrowed momentarily.

"We were talking to him the very evening it happened," lied Ronald cheerfully, and I could have laughed at the effect of the bluff. Tranton was obviously rattled; and why should he be if everything had been as he said?

"Of course, any friend of poor old Charlie's is welcome here," he said after a pause. "Did he tell you he was coming to see me?"

"He said he had an engagement at ten-thirty," answered Ronald. "And he mentioned something about that strange china mask."

"Really! What did he say?"

I glanced at MacAndrew; the situation was intriguing. Tranton was fencing blind; could Ronald get through his guard?

"I suppose I must have misunderstood him," said Ronald. "I gathered he was going to have

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a look at one belonging to his host. Have you got one yourself ? ”

We had drifted back into the drawing-room.

“ I ? ” cried Tranton. “ No.”

“ Strange. I certainly got that impression.”

“ As you say, you must have misunderstood him,” said Tranton. “ Well, gentlemen, if you have seen all you want to . . . ”

He paused, his hand on the door knob.

“ Just a minute, Mr. Tranton,” said the inspector quietly. “ You were a great friend, I believe, of Mr. Sinley’s.”

“ I was.”

“ Well, it may interest you to know that we have come to the conclusion that the verdict at the inquest was quite wrong.”

“ Indeed ! ”

“ Mr. Sinley was murdered.”

“ Murdered ! Good God ! Who by ? ”

“ That is what we are trying to find out. You know of no one, I suppose, who had a grudge against him ? ”

“ Good heavens, no. Charlie was a very popular man.”

“ I ask you particularly,” continued the inspector, “ because, amazing though it may seem, we think the murderer must have been in your flat.”

“ Impossible,” cried Tranton. “ The flat was empty save for the party in here. But in any case, what on earth makes you think that he was here ? ”

I was watching him narrowly, and I gave him full marks for his manner. If our suspicions



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were right, and he was implicated in the matter, no trace of guilt showed in his face.

"Certain indications," said MacAndrew. "But before I go into them there is one rather important little point that might help us. When you found all that broken china lying near the body, did you pick up any of the pieces?"

"Quite positively—no I touched nothing."

"And Major Vrowson touched nothing either?"

"I can't actually swear to that, but I am convinced he didn't. But surely that is a detail. What I want to know is how Charlie could have been shot by someone who was in this flat, seeing that he met his death on the landing outside."

"Through the ventilator in your cloak room," said MacAndrew quietly.

Tranton laughed.

"Really, Inspector, this sounds like detective fiction gone mad. Are you seriously suggesting that a man was concealed in the cloak room with a twelve bore? Why, I should have seen him leaving the flat."

"You went straight outside, Mr. Tranton. He might have remained there unnoticed and escaped later when you went back to the drawing-room."

"What about the gun?" cried Tranton. "It was beside the body when I got there."

"He might have passed that through the ventilator," answered the inspector.

"That is true," agreed Tranton. "But if I may say so, it all seems most unlikely."

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"When you think of it, no more unlikely than Mr. Sinley coming to see you with a loaded double-barrelled gun."

Tranton shrugged his shoulders.

"I agree; that was inexplicable. Well, gentlemen, if you are right I trust you discover this man. I can't help thinking myself that the verdict was correct, and that it was just one of those amazing accidents that can never be accounted for. May I offer you a drink?"

"Thank you," said MacAndrew. "I should like one. Whisky, please."

"Say when," remarked Tranton, going to the sideboard and holding up a glass.

"Just right," said the inspector, as he took it. "Sorry to have intruded in this way, but we thought perhaps we might find some litter or paper which would throw light on this man."

"My flat is at your disposal any time you wish," said Tranton politely. "Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see poor Charlie's murderer caught, if indeed he was murdered."

And a few minutes later we were in the street.

"A cool customer, Mr. Standish, if he's guilty," remarked MacAndrew. "I'll let you know the result of the finger-prints shortly."

"What's that, Mac?" said Ronald, staring at him.

"I've got the glass in my pocket," said MacAndrew with a wink. "What do you suppose I had a drink for?"

But it was not until six o'clock that we saw him again.

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"You're right, Mr. Standish," he greeted us gravely. "The marks on the glass and the china are identical. Further, I took advantage of his absence this afternoon to pay the flat another visit. The metal grille of the ventilator is loose, and there are the same finger-prints on that. Tranton did it; but how? How? How did he know when to fire the gun? Until we can find that out he's got us euchred. A clever counsel would tear our case to shreds. And I confess I'm beat. Can't you think of anything, Mr. Standish?"

Ronald stretched out his legs.

"A possibility has occurred to me, Mac," he said. "A bare possibility. When can we get into his flat again?"

"He's away this week-end," said MacAndrew. "But what's your idea?"

"So vague that I'll say nothing about it at the moment," answered Ronald. "There's just one thing we haven't tried. I propose to do so."

And not another word would he say.

\* \* \* \* \*

I did not see him again till the following Monday.

"Like to be in at the death, Bill?" he said. "We've got him. My bare possibility was a bull's-eye."

"How did he do it?" I cried eagerly.

"You wait and see, old boy," he grinned. "Come to my rooms at nine."

I found MacAndrew there, who was as much befogged as I was.

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"I've got a warrant," he said. "But I'm still completely in the dark."

And at that moment Ronald entered carrying a small parcel.

"Leave him to me, Mac," he said. "The fish is hooked, but the tackle is light. He'll require careful playing."

He was surprised to see us, was Tranton, and not too pleased.

"Surely," he cried irritably, "you don't want to search the flat again. I have an engagement."

"We shan't keep you long, Mr. Tranton," said Ronald quietly. "But some further facts have come to light. Now," he continued, when we were in the drawing-room, "I want to reconstruct the whole thing. You were in the drawing-room with the door shut talking to your friends when the shot was fired. You dashed out, and along the passage; you went to the front door and there you found Sinley lying dead. Do you mind if we do that? A substitute is taking the part of Sinley."

"This is absurd," said Tranton. "However, if it affords you any satisfaction, I will."

We followed him to the landing outside, where a constable lay sprawling on the floor with the gun beside him, and broken china lying about near him.

"That's right," said Tranton, and suddenly gave a little gasp. I glanced at him; his face was dead white. He was staring like a man bereft at the ventilator, where the top bit of the broken mask hung on a nail.

"Quite right, isn't it?" agreed Ronald.

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"But you seem surprised. Wasn't that piece on the nail when you came out the other night?"

"Of course not," he stammered. "How could it have been?"

"How indeed," said Ronald pleasantly. "You at once took it down."

"A lie," shouted Tranton.

"Then how come your finger marks on it?" asked Ronald quietly.

"I may have touched it as it lay on the floor," said Tranton sullenly.

"Quite positively—no," was your answer to the inspector's question," remarked Ronald.

"Good God! man, with a tragedy like that one may forget a trifle." Tranton with a great effort had recovered his self-control. "In any event, what has it to do with me? I was in the drawing-room when it happened."

"Let us return there," said Ronald. "As you say you were in the drawing-room talking to your friends."

"And if you'll tell me how anyone in the drawing-room could know when a man arrives on the landing outside I shall be obliged," he sneered.

"Just what I am going to tell you," answered Ronald, unwrapping his parcel. "For that is the very point that has been worrying us. You see, Tranton, you murdered Sinley by firing a fixed gun electrically through the ventilator. You had asked him to examine that strange mask you had suspended on a nail . . ."

"Are you mad?" spluttered Tranton.

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"But our difficulty, in view of the fact that the lift is absolutely silent, was to find out how you knew when he was in position so to speak. And then it suddenly dawned on me that not only were you talking, but you were playing the wireless. Shall we turn it on now, Tranton?"

The colour of chalk, Tranton plucked at his collar ceaselessly.

"When trying it before we found a valve had been removed," continued Ronald. "Which struck me as strange, since it was playing all right on the night of the party. So I obtained another. Here it is. Hold him, Mac."

Struggling like a madman in the grip of the inspector and the constable who had joined us, Raymond Tranton strove to get at Ronald, who was imperturbably adjusting the valve.

"Now," he said, "let's hear the news."

He switched on; then, going to the window, he waved his hand.

"Another constable representing Sinley is about to come up in the lift," he said. "Listen."

It started suddenly; a clear piercing note from the wireless. Then it stopped.

"The lift is up," said Ronald quietly.

Came a pause; then the noise started again.

"Now it's going down. And now Sinley is looking at the mask. And now you killed him, Tranton. That is how you knew when he'd arrived on the landing."

The shrill note stopped, and in the room there was dead silence.

"The lift was inaudible, save when the wireless was playing. Then, the lift being electric,

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*that* noise took place. Ingenious, Tranton, very ingenious."

"You can't prove it," snarled the other.

"At any rate," said Ronald affably, "we can have a damned good attempt."

## 4

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"SHOW the gentleman in, Sayers," said Ronald Standish, tossing the card his man had just given him over to me. I glanced at it and saw that our visitor was a Mr. Alfred Humber of Humber, Jones and Humber, Gray's Inn; and a moment or two later a typical family solicitor entered, who looked from one to the other of us in doubt.

"Take a chair, Mr. Humber," said Ronald, rising and pulling one forward. "This is Mr. Miller."

Mr. Humber sat down and mopped his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Cooler in here than it is outside, Mr. Standish," he remarked in a deep, rather pleasant voice. "But as I expect you are a busy man, I'll get down to the reason of my visit right away. It was Mr. James Marrowby from whom I heard about you some two years ago, and I docketed your name for future reference should the occasion ever arise."

Ronald bowed. "I remember Mr. Marrowby's case well," he remarked. "How can I be of service to you?"



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Mr. Humber drew some papers from his pocket and adjusted a pair of spectacles.

"I should like to make it quite clear at the beginning, Mr. Standish," he said, "that I can only give you a bare outline of what has happened. The details I do not know myself, but I am hoping that if you are sufficiently interested you will come forthwith to Ashington Manor and go into the matter more fully. Have you by any chance read the morning papers closely? You haven't. Then you will not have seen the small paragraph that contains the news.

"Ashington Manor lies not far from Tenterden, and it belongs—or rather belonged—to a Mr. George Sinclair who has been a client of my firm for years. And it is in connection with his sudden and very unexpected death yesterday that I have come to see you.

"But before I come to that part of it, which I have only heard in brief over the telephone, it will be necessary for me to give you some details as to his circumstances generally. He was a man just rising sixty-five, in excellent health save that recently he has been having some little digestive trouble for which a doctor has been treating him. He was unmarried, and for the past four or five years his nephew John Sinclair has been living with him. His hobbies were a strange mixture, gardening and toxicology, and for the purposes of the latter he had built a room at the end of the garden which he used as a laboratory and study. It was in this room that he was found dead by his nephew at four o'clock yesterday afternoon.

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"I must now deal with another aspect of his affairs, which, as things have panned out, is a very important one. I allude to finance. Mr. Sinclair some years ago was a quite wealthy man, but he was one of those dear fellows who was under the fond delusion that he was a financial genius. And it soon became apparent to us that unless he was watched carefully he wouldn't remain wealthy for long. So we persuaded him to put his investments in our hands, where they have remained ever since. We also advised him to take out an insurance policy on his life, which he did. And it is over this policy that the trouble, if any, is going to arise. I have it here with me and I will give you the details.

"The business was effected with the Southern British, and the policy was for a certain number of years or earlier death. You are doubtless familiar with similar schemes."

"I am," said Ronald. "How many years was it?"

"Twenty-five; of which twenty-four and nine months have already elapsed."

"And for what was he insured?"

"The sum which would have fallen due, had he lived, in three months from now is just under twenty-five thousand pounds."

"Which now that he is dead falls due at once," remarked Ronald.

"Now we are coming to the point, Mr. Standish." The lawyer leaned forward impressively. "Again I must remind you that my information is of the scantiest, and that what

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I am about to tell you is what I heard in an agitated conversation over the 'phone with his nephew. John told me, that amazing though it might seem, the circumstances pointed to suicide."

"In which case the company won't pay up," said Ronald.

"Exactly. But as John said to me, the thing is incredible. What possible reason could there be for him to take his own life? His finances were sound, though like all of us he had felt the draught during these past few years. And in three months from now he would have received twenty-five thousand pounds."

"Come, come, Mr. Humber," remarked Ronald, "there are other reasons for suicide beside financial ones."

"I would be the last to deny it," said the lawyer. "But in his case I can think of none. He thoroughly enjoyed life; he was healthy; there was no question of the loss, say, of a devoted wife. There is nothing, Mr. Standish, that I can think of which could have caused my old friend to take his life."

"How did he do it?" asked Ronald.

"I understand from John that he drank poison," answered Mr. Humber, and Ronald raised his eyebrows.

"That looks a pretty deliberate action," he remarked. "I mean, I take it, that since there is no question of foul play . . ."

"Good heavens! no," cried the lawyer.

"Then the only alternative to suicide is that it was an accident."

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"Precisely. Precisely, Mr. Standish. And it is in order to try and establish the fact that it was an accident that I have come to you. Your trained eye will notice things that ours will miss. It is not only a question of the company paying up, believe me ; though naturally one doesn't want to lose the money. But it is the stigma of the thing that I want removed. And so I am venturing to ask you if you will be good enough to accompany me down to Ashington Manor, and go into things first hand on the spot."

Ronald rose.

"All right, Mr. Humber ; we'll come. Though I must frankly confess that from what you have told me up to date things don't look too bright. One would hardly expect a man whose hobby is toxicology to drink poison by accident."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ashington Manor was a medium-sized house lying some distance back from the road, down to which the property stretched. Some fine old trees fringed the lawn, and partially hidden amongst them was a low building which was obviously the laboratory to which Mr. Humber had alluded.

Standing by the front door as we drove up was a young man of about thirty, and with him was a short thick-set companion who I instinctively put down as belonging to the police.

"My dear John," said Mr. Humber as the car drove up, "my very deepest sympathy. I can hardly believe it even now."

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"I can hardly believe it myself, Mr. Humber," said the young man. "The whole thing was so tragically, so unbelievably sudden. By the way, this is Inspector Durrant."

"And this is Mr. Standish," said the lawyer, "who has kindly come down to help us if he can."

John Sinclair bowed.

"Very good of you," he remarked. "We want all the assistance we can get, don't we, Inspector?"

Inspector Durrant gave a non-committal grunt.

"Assistance won't alter facts, Mr. Sinclair, I'm afraid," he said. "And it's facts that we have to put before the coroner."

"At any rate," put in the lawyer, "it will do no harm to hear the facts. Shall we go inside?"

We followed John Sinclair into the house.

"They can be told very shortly," he said, when we were settled in his study. "My uncle, as perhaps you have heard, Mr. Standish, was a very ardent toxicologist. And yesterday afternoon he announced his intention of continuing some experiments he was engaged upon down in his laboratory, which is the building you see across the lawn. He was working, so he told me at lunch, on a little known African poison belonging to the group with which the points of darts and spears are sometimes impregnated by the natives—I believe curare is one of the family—a group of probably the most deadly poisons in the world."

"The old man had seemed a bit moody and

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irritable during the morning, so as I had to go into Tenterden myself I was glad he had something to take his mind off."

"Have you any idea why he was moody and irritable?" asked Ronald.

"I don't think he was feeling very fit; that's what he told Ames the butler. He's been having trouble with his digestion, and as I told you, Inspector, I'm convinced my theory is right."

"Take it in order, sir," said the inspector. "That comes later."

"I returned from Tenterden about four," continued Sinclair, "and as I was passing the laboratory I put my head inside to see how he was getting on. To my horror I saw the dear old chap lying contorted on the floor in a corner of the room, and quite dead. For a moment I was completely stunned; I could hardly believe my eyes. Then I rushed to the house and telephoned for the doctor, though it was obvious that my uncle was beyond human aid.

"Doctor Streatham came immediately, and together we returned to the laboratory. Everything, just as it is now, was as I had found it, and while the doctor made his examination I took stock of things. The desk was in its usual state of untidiness, but there was one most unusual feature about it. My uncle was the most abstemious man, and he rarely touched spirits. But standing on the desk with the stopper out was a decanter of whisky and a siphon, and a half-filled glass of what appeared

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to be whisky and soda was on the blotting-pad in front of his chair. In addition to that a tiny bottle, also with the stopper out and marked 'Poison,' was beside the glass.

"I had just finished investigations to that point when the doctor called me.

" 'Bend down and smell your uncle's lips,' he said gravely, and somewhat unwillingly I did so. And at once I perceived what the doctor was driving at. A faint but very pungent odour hung round them, and I was not surprised when the doctor beckoned me over to the table again, and pointed to the bottle of poison. I sniffed it; the smell was the same, though infinitely stronger. So with the whisky and soda, this time faint but still unmistakable.

" 'I am afraid there can be no doubt as to what has happened,' said Streatham after a while. 'For some inexplicable reason your uncle has put this poison, whatever it may be, into a whisky and soda and has drunk it.'

"And then the full implication of his words struck me.

" 'Good Lord! man,' I cried, 'you aren't suggesting that he did it on purpose. That he committed suicide?'

"He stared at me in silence; then he shrugged his shoulders.

" 'I'm devilish sorry to have to say so, my dear fellow,' he said at length, 'but it's difficult to see any other solution that fits the facts. We must send for the police.'

Sinclair thumped his fist into the palm of his hand.

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"Gentlemen," he cried violently, "I don't care what anybody says : I don't care how black it looks, I am convinced that my uncle did not commit suicide."

"What then is your theory ? " asked Ronald quietly.

"He may have been experimenting," answered Sinclair. "The man who discovered chloroform experimented on himself."

"As an expert !" said Ronald. "With a poison he knew was deadly ? "

"Then I have another solution," cried Sinclair. "One I have already mentioned to the inspector. My uncle, as I have told you, has been having digestive trouble for some months past, and the doctor prescribed some drops which he had to take if he got an attack. Now he was not at his best at lunch yesterday, and it may be that he got worse in the afternoon. The bottle with the drops is standing on his desk, as you will see, and I believe he absent-mindedly muddled up the two. They are not unlike—the two bottles."

"Except," put in the inspector dryly, "for a staring red label of 'POISON' on one of them."

"You don't know how absent-minded my uncle could be," said Sinclair. "And it is clear he was so yesterday afternoon."

"How do you know that ? " cried Ronald.

"Very simple, Mr. Standish. My uncle had a peculiar trick, one which I think Mr. Humber will remember. You know how some people when they are thinking deeply will draw little



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pictures on blotting paper. He had another mannerism—you recall it, Mr. Humber ? ”

“ I do : perfectly,” said the lawyer, turning to Ronald. “ He had on his desk one of those implements for stamping an address on note-paper, and if he was engrossed in something or talking he would go on using it ceaselessly. Is that what you mean, John ? ”

“ It is,” was the answer. “ It was a piece of foolscap yesterday that he was stamping ; it is still there on the desk. Gentlemen,” he continued, “ I firmly believe that that is what really happened. My uncle was the last man in the world to take his own life. Mr. Humber knows, and I dare say he’s told you, Mr. Standish, that he had a considerable sum falling due to him from an insurance company in the near future. And only last week he was telling me the result of inquiries he’d made with regard to purchasing an annuity with the money. Does that look like the action of a man who is proposing to commit suicide ? ”

“ The impulse to do so sometimes comes very suddenly,” said the inspector.

“ Damn it, Inspector,” cried Sinclair half angrily, “ I believe you want that verdict brought in.”

“ Not at all, Mr. Sinclair,” said the inspector quietly. “ I knew your uncle and respected him far too much for that. But there’s no good blinding one’s eyes to the fact that it isn’t what you think or I think, but what the coroner and his jury will think. In addition to that, the

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insurance company will most certainly be represented. And on the face of it, putting aside for the moment all personal bias, I am bound to say that the evidence as it stands points to suicide, and not accident. I'm afraid it will be very hard to make the coroner believe that your uncle could have made a mistake in those two bottles, however absent-minded or engrossed he was at the time. What do you think, Mr. Standish ? ”

“ That I would like to go to the laboratory,” said Ronald. “ Where, by the way, is the body ? ”

“ Upstairs,” answered Sinclair. “ The post-mortem is to be held this afternoon.”

We trooped into the hall, and while crossing the lawn Ronald fell behind with me.

“ I don't see that we're going to do much good, Bob,” he said. “ As the inspector says, everything depends on the coroner's interpretation of certain facts. But if I was young Sinclair, I should be optimistic about the result. His uncle was well known and liked in the district, and a local coroner will bring it in as an accident if he possibly can in spite of anything the insurance may say.”

The laboratory was a large airy room. A big sink with running water, and a bench covered with the usual paraphernalia of the chemist occupied one wall. Shelves with rows of bottles were above it, but it was to the desk that our eyes instinctively turned.

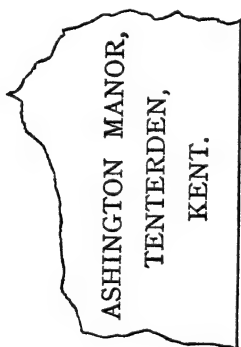
It was in a state of orderly disorder. A whisky decanter and siphon stood at the back ;

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on the blotting-pad was the half-filled glass just as Sinclair had described. Also the phial of poison. In one corner was another little bottle marked "The Prescription. To be taken as ordered," and Sinclair pointed to it.

"You see what I mean," he cried. "Those bottles are very similar except for the labels."

To the left of the chair was the paper stamp, with a sheet of foolscap close to it. And there on the side of the paper—not even on the top, which showed it was a subconscious trick of the dead man—the address was stamped.



The paper had slipped away from the machine and was lying near the blotter; and again Sinclair spoke:

"I've seen the dear old chap use sheet after sheet stamping all the way round the margin."

"But," said Ronald slowly, and then he paused. "By the way," he continued casually, "where did you find the body?"

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And only I, accustomed to his ways as I was, knew that that was *not* what he had originally intended to say.

"Over by the door," said Sinclair. "He had evidently attempted to go for help, and had collapsed."

"I see," answered Ronald. And then he shrugged his shoulders. "Well, Mr. Sinclair, I fear all I can do is to tell you to hope for the best. I would stress, if I was you, his cheery outlook recently, and the fact that so far as you know there was no conceivable reason why he should have taken his life."

He was moving towards the door, and Sinclair and the lawyer took no pains to conceal their disappointment.

"But is that all you can say?" cried the young man.

"Honestly, I fear it is," said Ronald; and at that moment I realised he was going without his stick. I was just picking it up when he flashed me a look from the door which said, "Put it down, you damned fool" as clearly as if he'd shouted it. Wondering greatly, I did so; he had spotted something quite obviously. But if he had, why not say? What could be the need for secrecy?

He discovered his loss half-way across the lawn, and with a muttered exclamation of annoyance went back for the stick while we strolled on.

"I confess I'm a little disappointed, Mr. Miller," said the lawyer. "He hasn't wasted much time, has he?"

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I murmured some conventional reply just as Ronald rejoined us.

"I wonder," he remarked, "if I might see your uncle's body, Mr. Sinclair?"

Sinclair raised his eyebrows.

"Certainly—if you wish to," he said. "I don't suppose there would be any objection, Inspector, would there?"

"None at all," said the officer. "Though I don't think you'll learn much, Mr. Standish. I will show you the way."

Mr. Humber declined to come with us, and we followed the inspector up the broad flight of stairs to a big bedroom overlooking the lawn. The blinds were drawn, and on the bed, covered with a sheet, lay the body of the dead man. Reverently John Sinclair drew back the covering, revealing his uncle's face quiet and peaceful in his last sleep. Ronald bent over it, and then straightened up.

"I wonder, Mr. Sinclair," he said, "if I might trouble you to ask your butler to go to my car and get the small bag off the back seat."

"Certainly," said Sinclair, going to the door. "I'll tell him."

He left us, and the instant he had gone to our complete amazement Ronald whipped back the sheet and very gently raised the old man's right hand.

"Light," he said urgently. "Switch on the light."

I did so, and from the bedside came an exclamation.

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"Do you see, Inspector?" he cried. "That deep prick in the palm?"

"What of it?" answered the officer. "It looks as if he'd cut a thorn out."

"Yes," said Ronald slowly. "Perhaps that would account for it. By the way, have you examined the glass with the whisky and soda in it for finger-prints?"

"I can't say that I have. It didn't seem necessary."

"I wish you would. And if you could stretch a point and give me a little poison out of that phial on the desk I would be very much obliged. I would like to add it to my museum."

He strolled to the door as Sinclair returned.

"There doesn't seem to be a bag in your car, Mr. Standish," he said.

"You don't mean to say that fool of a man of mine forgot it? It doesn't matter; I'm sorry to have troubled you. "Well," he continued, as he reached the top of the stairs, "I fear I can only say what I said before. Stress his cheerfulness at the inquest; bring out strongly his remarks about the annuity and I firmly believe they'll dismiss the idea of suicide. Good-bye, Mr. Sinclair; my deepest sympathies are with you."

"Won't you both stay to lunch? I have to go to London immediately afterwards, but I shall be delighted if you'll stop for some food."

"Impossible, I fear," said Ronald. "I have a very important case which I can't leave. Can I give you a lift as far as Tenterden, Inspector?"

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He accepted, so we bade good-bye to Mr Humber and entered the car.

"I think after all I shall stay here to lunch," said Ronald, as we swung out of the drive. "What's the best hotel in the place, Inspector?"

"The Swan," was the answer. "And if you like I'll bring you the poison there."

"Thank you. And the finger-print result. Don't say anything about it; my request might seem callous."

We dropped him at the police station and turned into the yard at the "Swan."

"What did you go back to the laboratory for?" I demanded curiously as we entered the bar.

He pulled an old bill out of his pocket and handed it to me. On the top it was stamped :

ASHINGTON MANOR,  
TENTERDEN,  
KENT.

"To see how nicely the paper stamp stamped paper," he remarked. "A very curious fact, Bob, and one that I've often noticed, is how hard it is to spot an obvious thing when it is presented to you in an unusual setting."

"Well, it's clear you've spotted something," I said, "but what you've seen is beyond me."

His reply consisted of asking the lady behind the bar if it would be possible to obtain a live guinea-pig. She opined that it would; that, in fact, there were some next door. And I,

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completely dazed, had another gin and French. Then we went in and had lunch, during which meal Ronald refused to talk about anything except cricket.

At three o'clock Inspector Durrant arrived and it was clear from the expression on his face that he was puzzled.

"I would very much like to know, Mr. Standish, why you raised that point about finger-prints."

"What have you found out?" asked Ronald.

"A very amazing thing. There are none at all."

Ronald rubbed his hands together.

"Excellent," he cried. "I verily believe, Inspector, that we're going to prove quite conclusively that Mr. Sinclair did not commit suicide. Have you brought any of that poison with you?"

The inspector laid a tiny test tube on the table.

"Splendid," said Ronald. "Bob, go and ask Amaryllis for the guinea-pig. Don't harrow her feelings, but I fear there is going to be a casualty in the guinea-pig world."

I got the little animal, and when I returned with it I found Ronald had taken out his hypodermic syringe.

"I'll inject a mere drop," he said, "and we'll see the result."

It was the nearest thing to being absolutely instantaneous I have ever witnessed. One convulsive jerk and it was stone dead. And the inspector, who had watched in silence, gave a sudden exclamation.



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"By Jove! Mr. Standish, I believe I see daylight. That mark on the old man's hand! You think he may have pricked himself accidentally with something impregnated with the poison."

"That's more or less the idea," said Ronald gravely.

"But how about the smell that lingered round his lips?"

"How about the absence of finger marks on the glass?" was Ronald's reply. "Has young Sinclair gone to London yet?"

"Yes. He went while I was in the laboratory with Mr. Humber."

"Did he see you there?"

The inspector shook his head, and Ronald again rubbed his hands as if he was pleased.

"Well, Inspector, only one thing now remains to be done, though that, I fear, may prove the hardest. And as I think it will be easier if I do it alone, I will now go up to Ashington Manor. And then later on when Mr. Sinclair returns from London I think I shall be able to show to nearly everybody's satisfaction that it was not suicide."

"Why nearly?" I queried.

"The Insurance Company, of course," said Ronald with a faint smile. "They'll have to pay up. Stand by, both of you, and when the time comes we will reconstruct the whole affair."

And with that he left us scratching our heads.

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It was not till seven o'clock that a message came through telling us to go to the Manor. The inspector had his own car outside, and when we arrived Ronald was talking to John Sinclair in the drive.

"I think I can show beyond doubt, Mr. Sinclair," he was saying, "that your uncle did not commit suicide. And my suggestion is that we adjourn to the laboratory for my demonstration. Inspector Durrant must see it because he will be occupying an official position at the inquest, whereas I am merely an outsider. Now I want," he continued, as we entered the room, "to try and visualise everything as it was. Your uncle was experimenting with the poison, and then I think we can assume that in an absent-minded way he sat down at his desk. Inspector, you stand by the door; Bob, you over there against the wall, and you, Mr. Sinclair, will you just play the part of your uncle."

"Sit at the desk, you mean?"

"That's right," said Ronald, as Sinclair sat down. "Now, let's get this right." He cocked his head on one side as he studied the effect, and we all watched him breathlessly. "The glass was there; the poison there: siphon and decanter. Good. Let's continue. Feeling *distracted* he picked up a bit of foolscap and put it in the stamping machine. Just do that, will you, Mr. Sinclair. Then he banged down the handle of the stamp."

John Sinclair did so; then with a shout of terror he sprang to his feet. His face was

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chalk-white, and he was staring hypnotised at a mark in his hand from which blood was already beginning to drip.

"Am I right, John Sinclair?" said Ronald in a terrible voice. "Then staggering in his dying gasp your uncle went to the door and collapsed. Just as you will collapse . . ."

"The antidote," screamed Sinclair, and Ronald laughed.

"It's only plain water this time," he said, "and a gramophone needle. But I think we have proved it was not suicide. Murder, Inspector—and there is the murderer."

Almost dazedly the inspector laid his hand on John Sinclair's shoulder.

"Warn you anything you say used evidence against you," he mumbled.

But I doubt if Sinclair heard; he was glaring vindictively at Ronald.

"You devil," he muttered. "You clever devil!"

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"What utterly beats me, Mr. Standish," said the inspector, "is what put you on the track in the first instance."

He had dined with us at the "Swan"; John Sinclair, realising he had given himself away hopelessly, had confessed and was lodged in a cell.

"An obvious thing in an unusual setting, Inspector," said Ronald. "It was very easy to miss, and you'd all missed it. So had John Sinclair. Otherwise he'd have pulled off a perfect crime. Will you cast your mind back

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to what will be one of the principal exhibits in the case—the piece of foolscap with the address stamped on the side. There is the unusual setting—an address on the side of a piece of paper. And so the obvious thing escaped attention; *the address was upside down*. The word “Kent” was nearest the edge instead of being farthest from it.”

“Well, I’m damned,” muttered the inspector. “Go on, sir.”

“I happened to spot it, and it at once struck me that it must be a very peculiar paper stamp. So I left my stick behind and went back and tried it. And I found the thing worked perfectly when I stamped a letter of my own. The address was the right way up. Thus at the very outset of the case one was confronted with a fact so bizarre and extraordinary that I felt there must be something vital in it.

“Now those paper stamps have two detachable blocks, one with the address embossed, the other with it countersunk. And they are fastened to the machine by two screws. Either therefore old Mr. Sinclair had unscrewed the blocks, turned ’em round, stamped the paper, and then again altered the blocks—an extremely improbable contention—or *there was a second stamp*. So at once the paper stamp, instead of being an ordinary article of desk furniture, became a very sinister feature of the case. And the mark on his hand confirmed my opinion.

“There was still however a long way to go. If I was right and the poison had been injected through the hand the glass of whisky was a

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blind. So also was the smell round his lips. That is why I asked you about finger-prints. There were none, because the man who planted the blind used gloves. That glass was placed on the desk after the old man was dead. It was then, too, that the drop of poison was put between his lips. And when the guinea-pig showed that injecting was instantly fatal, I knew I was on the right track.

"There still remained however the second stamp, and it was that that I went up to find. It wasn't difficult; it was in the study. An identical machine with rubber round the handle; just like the one in the laboratory. And with my magnifying glass I could see the tiny hole in the rubber through which the needle had come. Then very carefully I tried it and found that it stamped upside down.

"Here was proof; the stamps had been changed. But an inconvenient fact obtruded itself; what firm in the world would send out a stamp in such a condition? And in any event why had this idiosyncrasy not been discovered before? Still pondering, I stripped off the rubber handle—and then I understood. The metal part of the handle had been hollowed out, obviously to allow of the introduction of a little bag of poison. And since Mr. John Sinclair could not do that himself, he'd got someone else to do it for him. What excuse he'd made for such an unusual request, I can't tell you—you may be sure it was not done locally. But, realising it was *very* unusual, he had taken the precaution of removing the address blocks to

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avoid being traced. And when he replaced them he made his one incredible mistake ; he replaced them so that they stamped upside down.

“ That, I think, is all ; the rest is clear. He saw the possibility of a suicide verdict ; therefore he left the paper as proof that his uncle was in one of his absent-minded moods. And the only thing he did after he found the old man dead, except to stage the whisky red herring, was to change the two stamps back again.”

“ I congratulate you, Mr. Standish,” said the inspector. “ The only remaining point seems to be motive.”

“ My dear Inspector,” cried Ronald, “ that surely is obvious. Mr. John Sinclair saw twenty-five thousand of the best vanishing into an annuity which would die with his uncle. And that, from his point of view, was not so funny. No : the whole thing is only one more proof of what astoundingly foolish mistakes a clever man can make.”



## 5

### THE MYSTERY AT STYLES COURT

OF all the cases in which I have had the privilege of working with Ronald Standish, I think the most amazing was the one which had for its setting the historic old house of Styles Court. Much water has flowed under the bridge since the events I am about to relate took place: it is, in fact, only for that reason that it is permissible for me to commit them to paper. And even to-day some of the actors in the drama must be veiled under fictitious names, though to many the task of identifying them will not prove difficult.

Styles Court is a charming Elizabethan manor situated in the gently undulating country which lies north of the South Downs between Pulborough and Petworth. Originally the home of an old Sussex yeoman family it had continued in their possession from father to son for over two centuries, until increasing taxation and decreasing revenue had enforced its sale. It had passed into the hands of a wealthy stockbroker named Cresswell who, fortunately, had excellent taste as well as a considerable bank balance. This gentleman, in addition to



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installing running water and other necessities of modern life, also added a large room which started life with the intention of being used for billiards and finished its career as a sitting cum dance cum general utility room. He spared no expense over it. On the outside it conformed exactly to the rest of the house in a way which did credit to the architect ; inside it provided all that the most comfort-loving individual could demand. It was completely separate from the rest of the house, being connected with it by a short passage, and so possessed four outside walls. But an excellent system of central heating and a huge log fire made it perfectly habitable on even the coldest winter's day. And if I seem to have devoted over much space to the details of a mere room, the time has not been wasted, since it was to prove the scene of the whole tragedy.

It was on a morning in early September, 192—, that the telephone rang in Ronald's flat. I was with him at the time and we were debating on the rival merits of our respective links for a day's golf, when the interruption occurred. It was Cresswell himself who was on the line—we both knew him fairly well—and he wanted to know if he could come round immediately.

"Moreover," said Ronald as he put down the receiver, "I am inclined to think, Bob, that our golf is not likely to materialise. There was a note of urgency in Tom Cresswell's voice that I fear means business."

He arrived in a quarter of an hour, and with him was another man whose face seemed

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vaguely familiar to me. Cresswell introduced him as Sir James Lillybrook, and then I remembered that I had seen him at a City dinner some months previously. He was the guest of honour : one of those Powers behind the throne in the Treasury of whom the public rarely hears. And it was easy to see at a glance that, on this occasion, the usual unemotional expression of the highly placed permanent official was only maintained with difficulty.

"Can you chuck everything, Ronald," said Cresswell, "and put yourself at the disposal of Sir James?"

"Everything, at the moment," said Ronald with a smile, "consists of where Bob and I were going to play golf to-day. So fire ahead, Sir James. I hope no miscreant has been tampering with the Income Tax."

"I see, Mr. Standish," answered the other gravely, "that you know who I am. So I will not waste my breath by pointing out that at such a time as this, only the gravest emergency would have brought me to consult you."

Ronald held up his hand.

"One moment, if you please, Sir James. Bob and I are only humble readers of the newspapers, and are not behind the scenes. Is anything of special import brewing? From your words, I gather it is. And"—as he noticed a certain reticence on the other's face—"I need hardly point out to you, that if you desire my assistance, it is essential that I should be in full possession of all the facts. All," he repeated quietly.

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"I quite appreciate your point, Mr. Standish," said Sir James. "And I will put all the relevant facts in front of you."

He paused for a moment or two as if marshalling his thoughts: then speaking in the concise, almost legal manner of a senior Civil servant, he began.

"Two months ago, my chief, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, rented Styles Court from Mr. Cresswell."

"I saw that Mr. Bignor had done so," said Ronald. "He is there at present, I understand—and not in the best of health."

"Precisely: he is not in the best of health. Now, even from a superficial study of the newspapers, you are probably aware that the condition of affairs in Europe to-day, is very unsettled. And it is no exaggeration to say that the Press, with their usual loyalty, have not divulged one half of what they know. In a nutshell, conditions have seldom been graver, and, as usual, finance is at the root of half the trouble. Problems of security and boundaries play their part, but, *au fond* everything comes back to money.

"Realising this fundamental fact, Mr. Bignor some months ago started tentative negotiations with the representatives of certain foreign powers for a joint discussion on the position. And the essence of his idea was secrecy. No Press, however devoted, could be expected to refrain from comment on a conference such as we have become accustomed to since the war. And so, through channels into which I need not go at

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the moment, except to say they were not the usual diplomatic ones, his plans gradually took shape and the thing was arranged. No whisper of the thing escaped: the papers are still in complete ignorance of it.

"Under normal circumstances the meetings would have taken place in London, but the unexpected indisposition of the Chancellor rendered that impossible. And so it was decided to hold them at Styles Court. Do you by any chance know the house?"

"I do," said Ronald.

"Then you know the annexe Mr. Cresswell has built on and I need not bother to describe it to you. The first of the meetings was held a fortnight ago in that room. The delegates had come separately, and by devious routes, and I am certain—or I was then—that no inkling of what was taking place leaked out."

"One point I would like cleared up," interrupted Ronald. "What are the countries concerned?"

Sir James hesitated: then drawing a piece of paper towards him he wrote some words on it.

"I see," said Ronald, concealing a smile at such an excess of caution. "So there were just the three delegates, Mr. Bignor and yourself at the meeting?"

"Each delegate was accompanied by one adviser, who filled the same position as I did."

"Therefore there were eight of you in all?"

"That is correct. The meeting commenced after lunch, and lasted till dinner, when the delegates motored back to London, having

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arranged the date for the next meeting. And though this first discussion had only been on general lines, even at that one many things had been said which it was essential should not be divulged. For I need hardly point out to you, Mr. Standish, how invaluable inside information would be on matters of that sort to international financiers. You may judge then of our amazement and dismay, when it became obvious to us the next day, that that was just what had happened. Either a certain group on the Continent had pulled off an almost incredible fluke, or. . . .”

“Someone had blown the gaff,” put in Ronald quietly.

“So it seemed at the time. Which put everyone, as you can well imagine, in a very awkward position. The three principals were as much above suspicion as Mr. Bignor: their three advisers were occupying positions as responsible as I was myself. In short, the only solutions that occurred to us were that someone had, quite unintentionally, been indiscreet, or that, during the afternoon some of our conversation had been overheard by a listener outside. And so at our next meeting we decided—I should say Mr. Bignor and I decided—to eliminate, at any rate, the second alternative. As you know, the room has four outside walls, and two Scotland Yard men were posted so that no one could approach the annexe unseen.

“With regard to the other solution the matter had, of course, to be alluded to, and the

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ground was delicate. But with that characteristic directness which marks one of the nations represented, we got over the awkwardness more easily than I anticipated. Without any preliminary beating about the bush, and with a smile which robbed the remark of any offence he said—"Wal, gentlemen, I guess that someone, without intending to, has spilt the beans. We'll have to watch it this time."

Sir James shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm sorry to say that his words had no effect on the culprit. To use his own phrase, the beans were spilt again. The Scotland Yard men were satisfied that no one had been near the annexe; the possibility of it having been a fluke on the first occasion was eliminated, and we were left with the unpleasant impression that one of us was a traitor."

"One might almost say certainly," said Ronald.

"At the time I would have agreed with you: I did agree with you. Now—and this is my reason for coming here—I don't know. I have heard of your great reputation, Mr. Standish," he continued courteously, "but even you would have been powerless, I venture to think, to have kept such track of several people in London that you could have spotted the culprit. A word over the telephone, spoken in code from a bedroom was all that was necessary to convey the information. But at the time, as I say, I thought it was a certainty: we all did. Which rendered the atmosphere almost intolerable.

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"It was again the American who saved the situation with his usual blunt candour. I will not attempt to repeat his actual words, but shorn of trappings his remarks boiled down to this. One of us eight was giving the show away—he could not even exempt Mr. Bignor, who, though he was confined to the house had easy access to the telephone. And if that was so it was useless to continue the discussions. But in order to make absolutely certain, before taking such a drastic step as calling the conference off he suggested the following plan, if Mr. Bignor approved. We should all make Styles Court our head-quarters, and remain there for the night and day following our next meeting. And if no information leaked out the case would be proved and there would be nothing for it but for everyone to return home. He pointed out that as we were all under equal suspicion, no one need feel any offence should that suspicion prove wrong.

"Mr. Bignor agreed, and suggested the further precaution that the telephone should be disconnected."

Sir James lit a cigarette.

"I suppose I should say the scheme was a success. Certainly it seems to have cleared all of us, even if it has deepened the mystery. As you can imagine, everyone was ostentatiously careful of what they did. The telephone was out of action: no letter was sent: no one left the house save for a stroll in the garden and then he took care not to go alone. Additional men were drafted in from Scotland Yard, and it

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is certain that no stranger approached the house. And yet, next day it was obvious that all our precautions were in vain : the information had been passed on. How ? Where is this leakage ? ”

“ The servants,” said Ronald thoughtfully.

“ A C.I.D. man was seated during the whole meeting at the entrance to the passage leading to the annexe.”

“ Tell me, Sir James,” said Ronald after a while, “ the nature of the information. What I am trying to get at is this. For it to be of value to the people at the other end would it have to be a long and complicated message ? Or would some simple order such as Sell so-and-so short : Buy such-and-such a stock, be sufficient ? ”

“ Undoubtedly, that would be enough.”

“ Under those circumstances an easy code with an electric torch from a bedroom window would do the trick.”

“ Would anyone risk it knowing the house was watched. ? ”

“ True,” agreed Ronald. “ And yet it has got through somehow.”

“ I am asking you to find out how that somehow is. If, Mr. Standish, it was only a group of financiers pulling off a scoop it wouldn't matter so much, though it would be very annoying. But bigger things are involved : international problems of far-reaching importance.”

“ You are proposing to hold more meetings ? ”

“ More or less continuously over next week-end,” said Sir James. “ And since they will



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be the last, decisions may be taken then which must *not* be divulged."

"I see," said Ronald. "Well, Sir James, if I come down I take it you will be able to give me every facility for making enquiries."

"Short of being actually present at the meeting, Mr. Standish, you can do what you like and go where you please. All we ask is that you should solve the mystery."

He rose, and shortly afterwards left with Tom Cresswell.

"A bit of a teaser, Bob," remarked Ronald, as he stuffed his pipe. "What do you make of it?"

"That you hit the nail on the head when you suggested signalling from a window."

"Almost too obvious to be correct. Sir James was right there. Would the guilty man have dared risk it knowing the house was being watched by a cordon of the keenest eyed men in the world? Still, it remains a possibility, and about the only one I see so far. So let's get down there at once, Bob; we've got a couple of days to spy out the land."

\* \* \* \*

Mr. Bignor having evidently been put wise to our arrival, received us with the greatest courtesy.

"I sincerely hope," he said as he shook hands, "that you will be able to solve it, though I confess that I see no ray of light myself."

He apologised for not being able to put us up, but Ronald assured him that we were quite

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comfortable at the local inn. And with that we left to start investigations. And the first man we ran into was Inspector McIver, an old friend of ours. He grinned when he saw us.

"Horse, foot and artillery all mobilised," he remarked. "But honestly, Mr. Standish," he grew serious again, "it is a bit of a poser."

"So it seems," said Ronald, leading the way towards the annexe, where a man was seated in an arm-chair quietly smoking. He sprang to his feet as the inspector entered.

"All correct, sir," he reported.

"This room has had a man in it day and night, Mr. Standish, ever since the last meeting," said McIver. "And during the coming conference someone will be here up to the moment the gentlemen arrive, and will take over again the instant things are finished for the day."

"You examined the room, of course?"

"Almost to the extent of ripping up the wainscotting," grunted McIver.

"Naturally, I need hardly have asked. How many men did you have round the house that night?"

"Enough to keep every room under observation," said the inspector. "If you are thinking of the possibility of someone signalling, rule it out."

Ronald nodded.

"And how many inside?"

"A man at the foot of the staircase; a man at the foot of the servants' staircase, and two men doing a general patrol all night. Though really the gentlemen themselves were their own

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best detectives ; each of them is watching his next door neighbour as if he was a convicted murderer."

"I gathered that from Sir James," said Ronald with a smile.

"Now, of course, it is better. They feel they have been given a clean bill of health, and are certain that the information has been obtained from an outside source."

"And what do you think yourself, McIver ?"

"Just this," said the inspector grimly. "Whatever may have happened last time, there is going to be no outside source this next one. Excuse me, Mr. Standish, I'm wanted."

He bustled away, and we strolled out into the garden. The afternoon was hot, and throwing myself on a shady bank I took off my hat and let the faint breeze play round my forehead. In the distance a small river wound its way through the fields, whilst just below me the owner of a neighbouring farm was cutting his corn. He worked by hand in the old-fashioned way, and the field—for the job was nearly finished—was covered with neatly arranged stooks. And as I watched him the contrast struck home forcibly. Behind me, the might of a great police force mobilised to prevent international complications ; in front, not a hundred yards away, one of the real fundamentals of life—unchanged for thousands of years. And in all probability the diplomats would have felt scandalised had it been suggested to them that they and all they stood for were the less important of the two.

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A tall man came striding across the field, and pausing for a moment to speak to the farmer, came on up the slight rise towards us. It was Sir James, and he stopped as he reached us.

"I am glad you have been able to come so promptly," he said. "It is too early, I suppose, to ask if you've come to any conclusion?"

"None, I fear, Sir James," answered Ronald. "And I see no chance of doing so until the next conference begins. I have talked to McIver, but the scent is altogether too cold to arrive at any conclusions at present."

"He's the Scotland Yard man in charge?"

"Yes. And a very able officer. I have worked with him often. By the way, when was Mr. Bignor taken ill?"

Sir James thought for a moment.

"Two days before the first meeting."

"So that it was only just before that meeting that it was decided to hold the conference here and not in London?"

"It was decided on the actual morning," said Sir James.

"And how was the decision communicated to the delegates?"

"By my secretary personally."

"No possibility of any leakage there, I suppose?"

"Absolutely none," cried Sir James emphatically. "Merriman is beyond suspicion."

He strode away towards the house, and Ronald knocked out his pipe and got up.

"Let's go back to the pub, Bob," he said.

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"A pint of ale is indicated. We might walk over the fields."

Our direction lay via the cornfield. And as we came abreast of the farmer he greeted us cheerily.

"Nearly finished, I see," remarked Ronald. "You've got good weather for it."

The old man nodded.

"Might be worse," he conceded. "Be you gennelmen staying up at the Court?"

"No, we're at the Angel. I suppose," he went on casually, "a good many tourists and strangers come down to these parts?"

"A tidy few; mostly earlier in the year though. And we had some of them dratted hikers a few days ago."

"But they don't do any damage, do they?"

The farmer snorted.

"Not 'xactly damage; but silly nonsensical mischief. But what do they want to upset the stooks for? That's what I want to know."

"Why don't you tell them to put 'em up again?"

"They were gone before I got here in the morning," said the old man.

"Well, we all have our worries," said Ronald with a smile. "Good day to you."

We strolled on, Ronald deep in thought.

"A definite snorter this, Bob," he said at length. "Since it was only decided on the actual morning of the first meeting to hold it here, how could any outside agency get the news in time to alter their plans, unless there is a traitor in the camp?"

## THE MYSTERY AT STYLES COURT

"One of the servants at Styles Court would have been in a position to pass that on."

"Granted. But in view of the fact that, but for the Chancellor's indisposition, the conference was to have been held in London, what would have been the object of an outside agency squaring a servant here? If the original plan had been adhered to, none of the servants here would have been any use."

"That's so," I agreed. "Well—I give it up. Thank heavens, here's the pub! I can do with that pint."

I hardly saw him at all during the next two days. He disappeared after breakfast and only returned in time for dinner each night. Moreover he was not communicative, and I could tell by various little signs that things were not going well. He would discuss anything except the point at issue, and even then periodically he would fall into a brown study, staring out of the window, and drumming on the table with his finger nails.

I knew of old the futility of questioning him, so I possessed my soul in patience till he should choose to be more talkative. Twice McIver came to the inn and they had long consultations, but it was not until Friday that Ronald alluded to the matter again with me.

"Now we start the doings, Bob," he said. "And it is a lucky thing that the weather is set fine. For the next few days we join McIver's merry lads."

"Delighted to hear it," I cried. "The last two days have not been a scream of gaiety."

## THE MYSTERY AT STYLES COURT

"Sorry, old boy," he said. "Afraid it's been damned dull for you. And the trouble of it is that I may be on the wrong line now."

"You've got an idea anyway?"

"The vaguest," he said briefly. "Bring your little camera with you."

I slipped it in my pocket and we started off.

"Are we going to take pictures of the delegates?" I asked.

"No, my dear Bob, we are not. We are, if luck is with us, going to take pictures of the sleepy English country-side."

We reached Styles Court and McIver joined us.

"They've all arrived, Mr. Standish, and the conference begins after lunch."

"You examined the room again thoroughly this morning?"

"Every nook and cranny of it. There's nothing there. Would you like to walk round the defences?" he asked jocularly.

"Hardly necessary," laughed Ronald. "I can see 'em bristling. No—I'll just take a photograph. Come along, Bob."

We went to the bank where we had rested three days before.

"A charming view," said Ronald. "I see that the farmer, who rejoices in the delicious name of Buzzle, has finished his labours, and the golden corn, if not actually waving, looks delightful in the foreground. Take a picture, Bob."

"I don't see anything particularly charming about it," I remarked.

## THE MYSTERY AT STYLES COURT

"That's because you lack the artistic sense," he grinned. "And now we can go back to the pub."

"But I thought we were joining the party here."

"Only at stated intervals, old boy," he answered. "McIver is quite capable of holding the fort in our absence. Provided we are back here before dawn to-morrow all will be well."

And not another word would the aggravating blighter say, save a few vague generalities which only increased my curiosity.

"It can't be coincidence, Bob, and yet . . . Anyway, we'll know for certain to-morrow."

"What?" I demanded.

"If it's coincidence," he grunted.

He woke me at four o'clock next morning, and waited with barely concealed impatience whilst I put on some clothes.

"Don't forget your camera," he cried, as I bolted a cup of tea.

And then he led me, almost at a run, back to our vantage point in the grounds of Styles Court. We passed two of the C.I.D. men, yawning and stiff from their night's vigil, and after a while McIver joined us. The first faint streaks of dawn were showing over the downs: a low lying mist covered the country in front of us like a carpet. And then the sun itself showed over the ridge of hills. The mist eddied in thin wisps and began to lift, and glancing at Ronald I saw his eyes were gleaming with excitement.

Slowly the sun crept up above the horizon:



## THE MYSTERY AT STYLES COURT

the white blanket rolled sluggishly back from the little hill on which we stood. And suddenly Ronald gave a cry of triumph.

"So it wasn't coincidence! We've solved the first part of the problem. Take a photo, Bob."

"But I'll only get the cornfield," I protested.

"That's all I want," he answered.

I focused the camera, and as I did so there came the drone of an aeroplane in the distance. The noise came nearer and nearer and glancing up I saw the machine. It was a Puss Moth flying low, and with a roar it passed over the house and disappeared.

"Now then, McIver," cried Ronald, "it's up to you. There's not a moment to be lost. Get to the village and fuse the bally telephone wires if necessary."

"I hope to Heaven you're right, Mr. Standish," said the inspector.

"Of course I'm right, man. For God's sake get a move on."

McIver hurried away and Ronald turned to me.

"Take another photo, Bob, now that the light is better, to make sure. And then we'll rout the local chemist out of his bed and force him to develop them."

I made a second exposure, and still feeling completely bewildered followed him back to the inn.

"Perhaps you will now condescend to enlighten me," I remarked peevishly.

"All in good time, old boy," he answered.

## THE MYSTERY AT STYLES COURT

"The method we know : the culprit we don't—as yet."

\* \* \* \* \*

The snapshots were ready by ten o'clock, and slipping them into an envelope I stepped out into the street just as McIver passed in a car. A youngish man was with him, and when I got back to the hotel, the car was standing empty outside the door. Of Ronald there was no sign, and I sat down in the lounge to wait for him. Ten minutes passed—a quarter of an hour, and then I saw him coming down the stairs. And a casual remark died on my lips : never had I seen him so grave and so stern. Behind him was McIver with the other occupant of the car, who was now looking thoroughly frightened.

"You have the prints, Bob?" said Ronald, coming across to me.

I handed him the envelope.

"Good. Then come in here with me. I am expecting a visitor shortly. McIver—will you wait in the bar."

He led the way into a small parlour and I followed. Then, having examined the snapshots, he flung himself into a chair.

"My God! Bob," he said heavily, "the end of this hunt is a bit of a nerve shatterer."

He sat smoking moodily till the landlord opened the door and ushered in Sir James Lillybrook.

"I got your message, Mr. Standish, and since it was so urgent I came at once. Have you discovered anything?"

## THE MYSTERY AT STYLES COURT

"I have," said Ronald.

"Well, please be as quick as possible," remarked Sir James. "We are meeting at eleven to-day."

"Will you look at those two snapshots, Sir James," said Ronald quietly.

The other glanced at them, and for an instant his eyes dilated.

"With special reference to the cornfield," continued Ronald.

"Well," said Sir James. "I am looking."

"Do you notice any difference beyond the obvious one of the mist?"

"I can't say that I do."

"One of them, Sir James, was taken last night, and all the stooks of corn are standing upright. The other was taken this morning and three of the stooks are lying flat."

"Now you mention it, so they are. But what is the significance of that?"

Ronald went to the door.

"McIver," he called, "will you both come here."

And as Sir James's eyes fell on the young man he gave a strangled gasp and swayed as if he was going to fall. Ronald closed the door again, and with his back to it stood watching the other who was struggling to regain his self control.

"I see you recognise the pilot of the aeroplane," said Ronald gravely. "Well, Sir James, it is not for me to ask what induced a man in your position to act as a traitor to his country: presumably it was money. All I am concerned

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with is my own course of action. When you all dispersed after the earlier meetings and went back to London, the thing was easy. Then, when you remained here, you had to think of another plan. So by knocking over different numbers of stooks of corn you arranged to send different messages to the men who are in league with you, through the pilot outside—who I am glad to say had no idea what he was really doing. And my plain duty is to report what I have discovered at once to Mr. Bignor."

"For God's sake don't, Mr. Standish," cried Sir James in a shaking voice. "Think of the disgrace. I could never stand it, I had been speculating: I was desperate. My son: he's just left Sandhurst. My wife. . . ."

But Ronald's expression showed no sign of relenting: in his particular code some things were beyond the pale.

"Because of your wife, and because of your son, and even more because of the hideous public scandal which would be involved, I am going to make a suggestion to you. There is good rough shooting round Styles Court. . . ."

While a man may count ten they stared at one another: then Sir James Lillybrook rose, and without a word walked through the hall to his waiting car.

\* \* \* \* \*

I got things out of Ronald that afternoon. He spoke in jerky, clipped sentences—sentences punctuated by long pauses when he stared with sombre eyes over the fields at Styles Court.

## THE MYSTERY AT STYLES COURT

"Buzzle, the farmer, and the hikers. Hikers wouldn't knock down stooks. . . . Besides, the mist. . . . They wouldn't sleep out in the open at this time of year if they could avoid it. . . . Then the aeroplane. . . . Buzzle remembered it flying so low over his farm that he looked out, and it was then he saw that some stooks had been knocked down. . . . And that morning was the only morning they were knocked down. . . . And that morning was the morning of the conference when special precautions were taken. Coincidence perhaps: but it used to be done in the war if you remember, signalling to aeroplanes by signs on the ground. . . .

"I was sure it was somebody engaged in the conference: no outside agency could have got on to things so promptly without inside information. . . . But I never dreamed it was Sir James. . . . Once the delegates had given up returning to London after the meetings he had to act quickly. . . . Told young Ramsden, the pilot, that the number represented a code message to a bookmaker. . . . Gave him a telegraphic address to send it to, and pitched a yarn about liking his flutter but not daring to send betting wires from Styles Court. . . . Appealed to the boy's sense of sport. . . . And, of course, he has no idea even now of the real meaning of the messages. . . ."

"How did you get Ramsden?" I put in.

"McIver had a man at every aerodrome within a radius of ten counties. . . . Picked up the right one on the telephone this morning."

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He rose and walked up and down with his hands in his pockets.

"Just luck. If Buzzle hadn't mentioned hikers that first day we saw him the plan would have succeeded. No outsider would notice a few stooks lying flat, or attach any importance to it. And it only took half a minute after dark for Sir James to stroll into the field and upset 'em. The poor devil was so sure he could not be found out that he actually came to me when Bignor proposed outside help. God! Bob—was I right in what I suggested to him? Hallo! landlord, what's the matter?"

"Accident up at the Court, sir. One of the gents staying there—Lillybrook the name is, I think—was out shooting. And the gun went off when he was getting over a fence. Killed him on the spot. Shockingly careless some gentlemen are with guns. Some beer, sir?"

But Ronald Standish did not seem to hear the question. And after a while he turned on his heel and swung away down the village street. For there are times when it is well that a man should be alone.



6

THE MAN IN THE SALOON CAR

"COME in, Bob, and take a pew. Philip has just returned from a rest cure in Paris, and he's feeling a bit hot and bothered. Tell us the tale again, Philip."

Ronald Standish waved his hand towards the sideboard, and Philip Hardy, his long legs stretched out in front of him, lit a cigarette.

"How are you, Bob?" he said. "You look your usual repulsive self."

"When did you cross, Philip?" I asked.

"Boat train this morning, old boy. Why, Heaven knows: I usually fly. And if I had this time, I shouldn't be here now boring Ronald."

"You aren't, Philip," said Ronald. "Not a bit. He's been having adventures, Bob, and I want you to hear 'em."

"Who is she this time?" I asked resignedly, knowing Philip's habits.

"It isn't a she; it's a he—or rather a bunch of them. I can't tell it all over again, Ronald; probably the whole thing is imagination on my part."

Ronald strolled to the window and glanced out.



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"It's not imagination, Philip, that you've been followed here," he said quietly. "Sit down. I'll do any observation that is necessary. There's a good-looking gentleman on the other side of the road who arrived just after you did. He's still there. I must admit that he's not very good at his job. In fact we might send him out a camp stool. But that doesn't alter the main situation; somebody is very solicitous about your movements."

I confess I was surprised. Philip Hardy was a well-to-do young gentleman, with a pretty taste in horses and girls, and possessing the most extensive wardrobe I have ever seen. But since his brain was completely negligible, and he had never done, and never intended doing, a day's work in his life, what possible source of interest he could be to anyone else was beyond me.

"All right, old lad," he remarked wearily. "I will tell him the whole ghastly story. You see, Bob, I wasn't at all well this morning—not at all. I'd lowered some perishing hell-brew last night, and when I got to the Gare du Nord, I thought I might die at any moment. So I had a great idea; I would die lying down. Apart from the fact that you can't in decency die in a Pullman, I felt that the strain of contemplating a face from close range all the way to Calais would be more than I could bear. So I staggered up and down the platform looking for an empty compartment.

"Luckily the train was not full, and I managed to get one. I told the *conducteur* that

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I was a suspected case of bubonic plague ; bribed him with inordinate quantities of silver, and by the time we left Paris I had sunk into an uneasy doze which lasted as far as Amiens. There I awoke feeling, if possible, more unutterably ghastly than before.

"There is a short little tunnel just this side of Amiens station, and it was in that that I woke up. And as I opened my eyes I knew that something had caused the awakening—something had brushed my face. What, I didn't know. It wasn't there when my eyes were open. I could see nothing when we got into the light. But that something had touched me I was certain.

"The door into the corridor was open, and I was lying on the seat facing the engine with my head nearest the door. And suddenly there came into my range of vision a spectacle so repellent that I sat up with a jerk. It was a man with hair sprouting all over his face apparently searching for something in the corridor. He came nearer so that I saw him more distinctly, and he was far, far worse close to. He was an outrage : definitely for adults only ; a child would have yelled with fright.

"He paused by my door, and a series of explosive noises issued from the face fungus. It appeared that he had lost a piece of paper. It had fluttered out of his compartment, and blown along the corridor. Had I seen it ? "

"One moment, Philip," said Ronald. "This man was a foreigner ? "

"He was, though he spoke English."

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"All right. Go on."

"You must remember, Bob, that I was still partially unconscious," continued Philip. "Further, what little sanity had come back to me was numbed by the sight of this human gargoyle. At any rate I completely forgot about the thing that had brushed my face in the tunnel. So, with the best will in the world, I assured him I knew nothing about any piece of paper, that I had been asleep, and that at any moment I might be violently sick. On which, mercifully, he vanished from my gaze, and I slowly recovered. In fact, by the time the restaurant bloke came along ringing his bell I was just capable of movement, and picking up my newspaper I followed him to the luncheon car, passing on the way the compartment containing blackbeard.

"There were three other men in it, and as I got opposite the door I glanced in casually. Which was the moment selected by the train for a rather worse lurch than usual that threw me almost into the carriage, so that I blundered against one of these blokes' legs. I apologised, and having resumed a perpendicular position was about to move on when I noticed that the fellow I had barged into was making a clumsy sort of attempt to conceal something in his hands. If you get me, it was only noticeable because it was so clumsy. And out of the corner of my eye, as I got into the corridor, I saw it was a sheet of an ordnance survey map of England."

Philip Hardy lit another cigarette.

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"The whole thing, you understand, Bob," he continued, "was over in a second, though I have taken longer to describe it. And by the time I'd reached the restaurant car it had passed from my mind. I did wonder vaguely why a man should want to cover up the fact that he was studying a map; it seems a comparatively harmless pastime. But the whole thing was so trivial that I forgot all about it until I opened my newspaper. For as I did so there fluttered out a single sheet of paper which fell on the floor. I bent down and picked it up. On it were written four meaningless words.

"Now the old grey matter was still partially seized, but as I toyed with a more than usually revolting omelette, it began to creak a little. There could be no doubt at all that the slip of paper was the one the gargoyle had been looking for. And then I remembered my feeling when I woke that something had brushed my face. Obviously it was this very piece of paper that had blown along the corridor while the train was in the tunnel, and by some chance had drifted *via* my face into the newspaper beside me on the seat.

"I again studied the words, and came to the conclusion that they were some sort of code. Anyway, they meant nothing in my young life, and I had just made up my mind that I would return the paper on the way back to my carriage when I happened to look up. Sitting two tables away on the other side of the gangway and facing me was the map-studier. And he was glaring at me like a wild beast; or rather he

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was glaring at this blasted piece of paper which I, of course, had made no effort to conceal. I was examining it, quite openly, above the table.

"For an instant he caught my eye; then he immediately looked away. But it was too late; my curiosity was thoroughly aroused. The expression on his face had been so ferocious that I felt it couldn't be some harmless business message. And so I slipped the menu on my knee, and whilst pretending to read the newspaper I copied out the message. Just in time as it turned out. Hardly had I done it, and got the menu in my pocket, when map-reader rose from his seat and came over to my table.

" 'Excuse me,' he said, 'did my eyes deceive me, or were you studying a piece of paper a few moments ago that seemed to cause you a certain amount of perplexity? Pardon my impertinence, but I think you are the gentleman whose seat is in our carriage, and since we have lost a very valuable—valuable to us, I mean—message, I was wondering if by any extraordinary possibility it could have blown into your clothing, and that you have only just discovered it.'

"His tone was suave and perfectly courteous, and it seemed to me that since he had actually seen the damned thing in my hand, it would be fatuous to deny it. There was always the likelihood now of my suspicions being wrong, and its being a genuine business message in code. In any event I had a copy. So I said the exact truth; told him that unknown to

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me it had lodged in my newspaper ; that I had only that moment found it. With which I handed it back to him, and we resumed our respective meals.

"Bob, I was intrigued. You know how incredibly boring that journey is from Paris, and as the temperature in my head slowly decreased, I began to weave fantastic yarns in my imagination to pass the time. Map-reader had not waited for the end of lunch. He had disappeared shortly after our interview, but I sat in the restaurant car until we were running down the long hill into Calais. Then I went back to my own compartment, which I found exactly as I had left it save for one thing. I had shut the door on going to feed, and the window was shut too. But the instant I opened that door I spotted a faint smell of cheap hair grease—the sort of muck a third-rate hairdresser stuffs on Bert's quiff for Sunday best. Well, whatever my sins are I don't put stuff like that on my hair, so I thought I'd investigate. I went straight along to black-beard's compartment, where I apologised to him for having unintentionally deceived him at Amiens. And no further investigation was necessary. They'd got everything hermetically sealed, and the place reeked of the same filth. One of them, therefore, had given my stuff the once over, which would have put them wise to my name and address. Nothing was missing, nothing apparently had been touched. But attached to one of my bags is a card in a leather case, so they knew who I was.

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"And so far as I was concerned they were quite welcome to the information. At the same time, seeing that I'd given 'em back their rotten bit of paper, their interest in me seemed a little strange. However, in the bear garden at Calais I forgot all about the blighters, and as soon as I got on board I tottered down below to have a quick one when I butted into Jimmy Prendergast and proceeded to do a bit of bar-propping.

"After a bit Jimmy says to me, 'Who are your boy friends, Philip?'

"Sure enough there they all were in the dining-saloon which you could see into through the opening at the back of the bar.

" 'I've been watching 'em,' he went on, 'and they're talking about either you or me. I don't know 'em, thank God, so you must be the lucky one.'

"At which I told him what had happened, keeping the old optic skinned on the beauty chorus while I did so. And Jimmy was right: their loving interest in me had not waned. They were having the hell of an argument about something, and from the way any one of them who caught my eye immediately looked away, I knew I came into it.

" 'You mind your step, Philip,' said Jimmy. 'That man with fur on his face would eat his mother.'

"By Jove! Bob, Jimmy was right. And it's because of what happened next that I came round to see Ronald. When we got to Dover I waited as I always do for the mob to get off.

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I'd lost Jimmy, and I was standing near the top of the disembarking gangway and to one side of it. Suddenly I became aware of a very seductive scent beside me, and perceived a dame, pleasant to the eye, who was fumbling in her bag. And the next instant her landing ticket dropped on to the deck just inside the guarding rope. I naturally got underneath to pick it up, and as I was bending down I got the deuce of a blow in my back which shot me forward into the gap between the gangway and the ship's rail. In fact, as near as a toucher, I went overboard between the dock and the side of the ship.

"To put it mildly I was not amused, but when I'd recovered my balance and was on the point of giving tongue, I saw what had happened. Lying prone on the deck was one of the four men, with the other three bending solicitously over him.

" 'You're not hurt, I trust, sir?' said map-reader to me. 'My poor friend here is subject to sudden fits of vertigo.'

"Bob, I stared at him for about five seconds, and then I made the only possible answer—'Oh! yeah.'

"Fit of vertigo! I couldn't prove anything, of course, with the blighter lying there on the deck giving a spirited imitation of a half-dead codfish. But I knew, and he knew that I knew, he was lying. The whole thing was a deliberate attempt to kill me. If I'd gone overboard there was every chance of my being crushed to death between the ship and the wharf.



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"However, there was nothing to be done about it, so I returned the ticket to the lady who it was obvious must be in with them. Then I expressed my deep regret at the gentleman's lack of equilibrium, and departed to my seat in the Pullman. Give me a drink, Ronald: my throat's like a lime kiln after all that talking."

"Did anything happen coming up in the train?" I asked.

"Not a thing. Didn't see any of 'em again. The car met me at Victoria, and having dumped my kit I came round here. What do you make of it, chaps?"

"That you've acted pretty wisely, Philip," said Ronald. "If you are right—and I'm inclined to think you must be—and the episode on board was an attempt to murder you, you've butted into something considerably bigger than a mere business deal. The presence of the watcher outside confirms it."

"How the devil did he get there?" asked Philip. "No one knew I was coming to see you."

Ronald gave a short laugh.

"On your own showing, they knew your name and address before you reached Calais. A wireless from the boat, or even a telegram handed in at Dover, would give ample time for their friends in London to have your flat watched before you got there. After that it was merely a question of following you here."

"Where is this mysterious communication?" I asked. "Have you got it here, Philip?"

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"There you are," said Ronald, throwing it on the table. "See what you can make of it."

Scrawled on the menu card was the following cryptic message :

RARPA AIRAGNEREB AYDON  
FAEHSNROC

"Ask me another," I remarked. "Anything like that gives me a pain in the neck. Have you got it, Ronald?"

"I haven't tried yet," he answered. "Been too busy listening to Philip's spot of bother."

Our visitor looked at him anxiously.

"Do you really think that it's serious?" he asked. "Even granted they had a dip at me on board the boat, they can't do anything in London."

"My poor idiot boy," said Ronald kindly, "your remark only shows how very little you know of what can go on in London. I don't say they will have another go at you, but they may. The fact that you came here at once has prevented them doing so already, but unless I'm much mistaken you had better watch your step. They are obviously a bunch of desperate and unscrupulous men, and they know that you have had the original of this message in your hand. That you can't make head or tail of it is beside the point; they can't be sure that you haven't deciphered it."

"What do you suggest that I should do?" asked Philip.

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"Leave this card with me, and go to your club. Dine at your club, sleep at your club, and don't leave your club till you get permission from me."

"But, damn it, old boy," spluttered Philip, "you don't know what our smoking room is like after dinner. The only members who aren't snoring are the ones who have died during the day."

"Sorry, Philip, but it's got to be done," said Ronald gravely. "If it wasn't for that man outside there, I wouldn't feel uneasy. But the mere fact that he is there proves that they don't propose to let the matter drop. I believe you are in considerable danger, and therefore I want you to go somewhere where, humanly speaking, you are safe. No one can get at you in a London club. But if anybody calls to see you whom you don't know personally, you're not in."

"But what about you, Ronald?" said Philip, impressed in spite of himself. "My coming here has put you in the danger zone."

"Don't worry about me, Philip," laughed Ronald. "I have ways of my own of chasing people who think they're chasing me. But until I've solved this message—if I do solve it—I shall remain here. Then I'll telephone you. You push off now; you're safe in daylight. Get straight into a taxi"—he paused for a moment—"any taxi except the one waiting on the other side of the road."

He was peering cautiously out of the window.

"The plot thickens, my hearties. Our

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opponents lose no time. But the watcher has blotted his copy-book; he should not have spoken to the taxi-driver. I will ring up the rank. And remember, Philip, *you are not to leave your club.*"

He put through a call, and having done so again repeated the order.

"Under no circumstances whatever, until I say you may. 'Phone me when you get there to say that you've arrived; then sit tight. Here's the car. I'll come down with you. Give the driver the address of your flat, and re-direct him when you get into Piccadilly. Bob, you hold the fort for a moment."

He returned almost immediately.

"So far, so good. The watcher heard the address all right, but the dud driver is following Philip. So, unless some lucky intervention of red and green lights occurs to separate them, they will trace him to his club."

"You really think it is as serious as you say?"

"I do. This *can't* be a mere business communication."

He picked up the menu card and studied it.

"R A R P A . . . Turn it round . . . A P R A R . . . That's no good," He was talking half to himself. "No good at all . . . And the others look worse . . . Unless . . . Bob!"

He gave a sudden exclamation and seized a pencil.

"It is, by Jove! Bob: the second word is Berengaria spelt backwards. That's sense at

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any rate. N O D Y A is the third. No bon. And the fourth—well, it's a word anyway. C O R N S H E A F. But what about one and three? Berengaria and Cornsheaf. It's a bit hard to follow, but we must be on the right track."

"Hold hard a moment," I said. "I've heard the word Cornsheaf quite recently. It's a pub somewhere or other; quite a well-known one. I passed it the other day coming up from Bournemouth."

"The devil you did," he cried, getting out an ordnance survey map. "By Jove! Bob, you're right. It's between Basingstoke and Winchester. Which accounts for Philip's map-reading friend. On the way up from Southampton to London, you note. Berengaria. . . . Look up in the paper and see where she is at the moment."

I opened a copy of *The Times*. The *Berengaria* was due in Southampton that night.

"So that if we are going to find the connexion between her and the Cornsheaf we haven't too long to do it in," he said quietly. "There must be a connexion, Bob: it's quite impossible that there shouldn't be. Is it a harmless one? If so, why their agitation over Philip? And if it isn't harmless. . . ."

He broke off and sat drumming with his fingers on the desk.

"If one and three are in cipher, why aren't two and four? Perhaps they are not in cipher. They may be code words—insoluble unless you know the code. A five-letter code. Let us

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start with the best known of them all—our Mr. Bentley. Get him off the shelf, old boy, and see if they have an A P R A R.”

I turned the pages eagerly.

“They have,” I almost shouted in my excitement. “A P R A R . . . Arriving on.”

“Arriving on *Berengaria*,” he wrote. “Go on, Bob. What is N O D Y A ?”

I looked it up.

“N O D Y A . . . Await orders.”

“So there’s our message,” he said quietly. “‘Arriving on *Berengaria*. Await orders Cornsheaf.’ Interesting, Bob; very interesting. Who is arriving in the *Berengaria* to-night? Who awaits orders? And why at the Cornsheaf Inn, which appears to be a matter of some twenty-five miles from Southampton?”

The telephone shrilled suddenly, and he stretched out his hand for the receiver.

“Hullo . . . Speaking . . . What’s that? My God! Is he badly hurt? . . . Oh, . . . No report heard? . . . Listen. . . . Tell him from me that we’ve solved the message, and on my personal guarantee we will repay in full. No, I won’t come round now.”

He replaced the receiver and stood up, his face grimmer than I had seen it for a long while.

“This, Bob, has definitely ceased to be funny. Philip was shot through the upper part of the arm as he crossed the pavement to go into his club. No report was heard so it must have been some form of air gun, fired presumably from that following taxi.”

For a few moments he stood deep in thought.

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"If they'd killed him, I'd never have forgiven myself. But it proves one thing, Bob, if further proof was necessary. This matter is desperately serious. Ring up the Yard, will you, and ask for McIver."

I did so, and as I waited for the number Ronald crept cautiously to the window and peered out.

"Still there," he remarked, coming back into the room. "We're going to have some fun to-night, Bob."

"Here's McIver," I said, and he took the receiver out of my hand.

"That you, Mac?" he asked. "Standish speaking. Is anybody of extra importance arriving by the *Berengaria* to-night? Anybody who would cause the police a bit of alarm and despondency in case they might get hurt? . . . No? . . . I can't say. . . . I don't know whether it's male or female, or whether he's come from New York or Cherbourg. . . . No, Mac, I'm not fooling. There's something damned funny going on. So funny that a pal of mine who stumbled into it first and came and told me about it has just been plugged through the arm in broad daylight going into his club. . . . I knew you'd have heard of it, but it's the same show. . . ."

At that moment I happened to glance at the door; inch by inch it was opening. Glanced at Ronald; saw that he had noticed it too, and that his right hand was feeling in a drawer for his revolver. . . . Saw him make an imperative sign to me to get out of the line of fire: then

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watched him crouch behind the desk, while his level voice continued the whole time, though his eyes were bright and watchful.

"And it's a funny show, Inspector, as you'll hear for yourself in a moment. . . . I've solved the cipher, and this is how it reads . . ."

It brought the thing to a head as he intended it should. The door was flung open, and for the split fraction of a second the man who dashed in stood bewildered, his gun in his hand, looking for Ronald. And in that split fraction Ronald fired and stood up, while the man, cursing venomously, dropped his revolver from a hand already dripping blood.

"Leave that gun where it is," snapped Ronald, "or I'll plug you through your other arm. Get behind him, Bob, and belt him over the head with a poker if he tries any monkey tricks."

Then he began to grin; a noise like a gramophone record was coming from the receiver.

"All right, Mac," he said, "I wasn't talking to you. We've got a visitor. Like to come round and see him? Yes, it was my shooting party, not his. Thanks very much all the same. I'll keep him here till you arrive. All part and parcel of the same affair."

He replaced the receiver, and came slowly round the desk.

"Get the handcuffs, Bob," he said. "I'm getting tired of carrying the howitzer about the room. Put one round his left wrist. . . . Thanks. . . ."

With a quick heave he jerked the man into



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a corner, and the next moment the other handcuff snapped round the leg of a vast armchair.

"I don't think you'll get far attached to that little bit of furniture," he remarked quietly. "And now—who the devil are you?"

Crouching on the floor, his teeth bared in a snarl, our prisoner looked like an animal. He was young, in the early thirties. His face was sallow; his chin needed the attentions of a barber. But his eyes arrested one. They burned like coals of fire; the eyes of a madman or a fanatic.

"Well, who are you?" repeated Ronald. "Do you usually go round trying to shoot complete strangers?"

But the only answer was a snap of his jaws.

"Nice little thing to have about the house, isn't he, Bob," continued Ronald, and at that moment there came a frantic peal at the bell.

"Sounds like old Mac's fairy finger," he grinned, and even as he spoke the inspector came charging into the room.

"Great Scott! Mr. Standish," he cried, "what's all this about?"

He paused, staring at our captive.

"So that was your caller, was it? What's your game, my man?"

"Do you know who he is, Mac?" asked Ronald.

"I don't. But it won't be difficult to find out." He bent down, and the next instant drew his hand back sharply, as the man's teeth missed it by a quarter of an inch.

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"So that's the line, is it?" he said grimly. "I don't want hydrophobia yet, my lad."

Which gave me the privilege of seeing what an extraordinarily effective gag a handkerchief can be when placed inside the mouth like a bit, and knotted behind the head. It is, of course, at the discretion of the gagger how tight the knot is drawn, and McIver was merciful. He only put one knee in our prisoner's back when pulling. . . .

"Bite me, would you," he muttered. "Now let's see what we can find."

He ran an expert hand over him, and the first thing he produced was an ugly-looking stiletto.

"Quite fitted to run a babies' creche, isn't he?" he remarked. "What's this? Looks like the badge of some society. . . . And here's a letter addressed to P. Thompson. French stamp. Postmark, Paris. Address—ah! yes, I know it. Accommodation address. That damned little tobacconist makes quite a steady income out of that game. . . . But Thompson . . . Accommodation name, too, no doubt, Mr. Standish. What's inside? Single sheet of paper. *Il est arrivé*. Which, unless my French has deserted me, means 'He has arrived.' Who?"

He stared thoughtfully at the man on the floor.

"If I take that handkerchief off, will you speak?"

The other shook his head and his eyes gleamed venomously.

"If I'm any judge of human nature," said

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Ronald quietly, "you'll never get that man to speak. If you try to you'll only be wasting time, and I don't think we've got any to waste."

"But what on earth does he want to shoot you for?" cried McIver, scratching his head.

"Because as I was telling you over the telephone I have, quite by chance, butted into something pretty big. That's why I was asking you about the *Berengaria*. . . . Ah! did you get our friend's reaction to that, Mac? I was watching him purposely. . . . A code message was mislaid in the boat train from Paris this morning, by some friends of this specimen. I have decoded it. Arriving *Berengaria*. Await orders Cornsheaf. Which is an inn on the Southampton-London road. *Il est arrivé*. It is pretty obvious that the man who arrived in France is the same man who is arriving in the *Berengaria*, and whom our friend here and his pals seem anxious to meet—and to meet privately. And from what I've seen of this ornament's proclivities I shouldn't think the meeting is for the purpose of presenting the mysterious arrival with a birthday present."

"What do you suggest we do?" asked McIver.

"Do you see that good-looking man on the other side of the road? The one gazing everywhere except at this room. Get him arrested at once as a loiterer."

McIver, who knew Ronald of old, went straight to the telephone.

"Get a couple of men round here to remove this little bunch of joy to somewhere safe,"

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advised Standish. "And then, McIver, two car loads of trusty warriors in plain clothes, armed and ready for the road. We don't know how many there are at the other end, which as you already know is the Cornsheaf."

McIver was giving clear and rapid orders over the line, whilst our prisoner, writhing impotently, struggled to free himself. If looks could have killed us we would all have died painfully, and I found myself feeling almost sorry for the poor devil. His position was so incredibly ignominious.

"All fixed, Mr. Standish." McIver replaced the receiver. "What are you and Mr. Leyton going to do?"

"See the fun, Mac," grinned Ronald. "As soon as our visitor here has been removed, Bob and I will hit the road for the Cornsheaf too."

"Is it political, do you think?"

"More than likely, I should say. This badge is a new one on me, but judging by its owner I should hardly imagine it betokens the International Society of Dart Throwers. You say you know of no one in the *Berengaria* who would be likely to attract attention?"

"Not from New York. But if you're right our man got on at Cherbourg."

He smiled suddenly as he glanced out of the window.

"You must admit we don't lose much time, Mr. Standish."

I looked out. Protesting furiously, the watcher was being hustled into a car that had drawn up beside the pavement, and even as he

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departed a ring at the bell announced the arrival of our own reinforcements.

"Here's your man, Sergeant Latimer," said the inspector. "Feloniously entering a house, and unlawful possession of firearms. And watch him: he bites."

"You bet he does, sir. I know the customer."

"You do, do you? Who is he?"

"I wouldn't care to swear to his mother's name—or to his father's. But he passes as Georgio Pozzi. Half-bred Italian anarchist. Was in my district. And"—he caught sight of the card—"that's the badge of his damned society. A branch of the Mafia. I put in a report about 'em, sir, but of course, it's not your department. A bad gang, the whole lot of them—but so far the lodge over here have kept within the law."

"Well, they haven't this time," said McIver grimly. "Lock him up, and we'll get a move on. I'll come with you, Mr. Standish, if I may."

"What orders have you given the police cars?"

"To wait for us in Basingstoke."

Ronald roared with laughter.

"I was under the impression you asked me what I was going to do."

A smile twitched round McIver's lips.

"A matter of form, Mr. Standish. Just a matter of form."

Of all the strange adventures I have ever had with Ronald, I think this one was the queerest. True, it called for none of that detective ability on his part which in other chronicles I have

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tried to portray. The solution of the so-called cipher was so simple that it can hardly be said to count. In fact, as Ronald himself has frequently remarked, the cardinal error of the opponents was their attempt to murder Philip on board the cross-channel boat ; had they not done that no one would have bothered about the thing at all. And another throne in Europe would have changed its occupant.

It was growing dusk as we reached Basingstoke. Drawn up in the square were two cars, whose passengers were strolling about, looking at the shops, and who, the moment we stopped, came up and grouped themselves round the car.

McIver issued his orders, which, by the very nature of things could only be provisional.

"We don't know what to expect," he said. "But something is brewing at the Cornsheaf Inn. Number One car will take up its station beyond the inn, but in sight of it. Number Two will remain this side, and in sight of it also. Park your cars so that you can go in either direction immediately. After that you must act on your own initiative. I am going to the inn itself."

It was Ronald's suggestion that only he and I should actually enter the pub. At first McIver refused flatly ; he felt it was contrary to his professional dignity. But at last he was compelled to admit that there was every possibility of his being recognised, and he agreed to remain in the car outside the door.

And so, twenty minutes later, Ronald and I entered the bar of the Cornsheaf Inn, to find

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an atmosphere which would have been comical but for the fact that every suspicion was confirmed. The British yokel does not take kindly to strangers, and when those strangers consist of five of the most obvious foreigners one could hope to meet, the kindness is even less in evidence.

"Two pints, please," cried Ronald cheerfully, and it sounded like a man laughing at a funeral. Elderly men raised rheumy eyes from tankards of ale, and having gazed at us pessimistically returned to the contemplation of the group in the corner. No dart was thrown; no halfpenny was pushed. Intense suspicion hung like a pall over the assembled company.

The foreigners were aware of it. One of them was evidently Philip's black-bearded friend, and he kept glancing uneasily round the room. But always his eyes came back to the door, and he continually looked at his watch.

"Fine day it's been," said Ronald affably.

"Might 'a been worse," conceded the barman.

"Ay," acknowledged the oldest inhabitant. "That's right, Joe."

After which conversational high spot, silence again settled on the bar.

Suddenly, from afar off in the distance, there came three short blasts on a motor horn, and the foreigners grew tense. Blackbeard half rose then sat down again. And, gradually growing louder, came the roar of a powerful car. It stopped outside the inn, and a moment later the door was flung open, and a man looked in.

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Instantly the five of them rose and left the room.

"Come on, Bob," said Ronald. "This is our cue."

They were already in the car by the time we got outside, and as we joined McIver they started off at speed towards London.

"That our bunch?" asked McIver.

"You've said it, Mac," said Ronald. "Hallo! Here's another car."

Travelling fast, also towards London, came a big saloon. The inside light was on, and in the back a man was sitting reading. The red tail-lamp of the first car had already disappeared, and we followed the saloon.

"Not too close, Mr. Standish," cried McIver, flashing his torch as a signal to the police cars to follow. "What the devil is it all about?"

"Search me," said Ronald. "But the crowd in the first car are pretty tough."

The saloon in front swung over a hill, and dipped out of sight. Behind us were the two police cars, and as we breasted the rise we saw at the bottom of the hill the saloon car stationary. Two red lights gleamed in the road: a STOP sign barred the way.

"Easy," repeated McIver. "Not too close."

And even as he spoke the saloon, disregarding the traffic signal, ran through the control and proceeded on its way.

"Rum," said McIver, as we slowed down. The STOP signal still showed; the red lights still gleamed. And it was Ronald who let out a sudden shout.



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"That control is new. It wasn't here when we came down."

We drew up beside it; there was no watchman. Only a board in the middle of the road, and a pair of legs sticking out of the ditch—legs encased in black gaiters. We pulled him out, that poor devil in a chauffeur's livery, and there was a lump on his forehead the size of a hen's egg. But he was breathing, and leaving one of the men with him McIver got back into the car.

"Stamp on it," he said curtly. "Someone is going to get hell for this."

Up the next hill, and then in front of us a long stretch of road. But of the saloon car, no trace.

"There she goes," I cried, pointing away to the right, where we could see lights moving.

"Good for you, Bob," said Ronald. "Taken a by-road."

We came to it in about a quarter of a mile—a narrow twisting road between high hedges. And with the two police cars sitting on our tail Ronald drove all out. So much so that he had to ditch us to save ramming the back of the saloon car, which we came on suddenly round a corner.

"Put out all lights," cried McIver, and as we tumbled out of the cars there rang out from close by a scream for help. It came from a barn which one could see through a gap in the hedge, a barn from which a dim light filtered through the door.

We burst in. Dangling from a beam was the

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man in the saloon car ; round him on the floor were our friends of the Cornsheaf. Even though taken completely by surprise they fought savagely, but it was hopeless. In half a minute they were handcuffed in a circle, and the show was over.

" Well, sir," said McIver to the man they were just hanging, and who had been instantly cut down on our entry, " we were just in time it seems. They don't appear to like you. What's it all about ? "

" Are you the police ? " he gasped.

" We are," said McIver.

" Thank God ! " he muttered and pitched forward unconscious.

It was a strange story that he subsequently told us. A member himself of this secret society, which he had joined in ignorance of its true character, he had learned the full details of a plot to assassinate a certain foreign prince on the occasion of his state visit to England the following month. And it was to give away the whole thing that he had come over. But somehow or other he had incurred the suspicions of the other members, and they had decided to kill him.

Believing himself to be safe owing to the precautions he had taken, he had not bothered to inform the police of his intentions, and the first moment he had realised his folly was when the car stopped, the chauffeur was knocked out in front of his eyes, and the two men he dreaded most got into the car with him.

His name is immaterial, and as all the world

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knows the Royal visit passed off without a hitch. But though the particular gang we caught are never likely to trouble him again, there are others. And I do not think I would care to be in the shoes of the man in the saloon car.

## 7

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ADMITTANCE to the Pointed Shoe presents but few difficulties to those who wish to enter. On a payment of five shillings you become for the evening a guest of the proprietors, and a partaker—at a price—in the festivities, which last as a general rule till about five in the morning.

And here let me state at once that the Pointed Shoe is not one of those reprehensible establishments which sell forbidden liquor out of hours, and are invariably raided, sooner or later, by hordes of detectives in regulation boots.

The Pointed Shoe is run on absolutely legal lines, and furnishes yet another example of the futility of trying to enforce unwanted legislation. Attached to it, though ostensibly quite a separate undertaking, is a wine merchant whose hours for opening are midnight to five a.m. From this gentleman then, on the production of much money, may be obtained a bottle of whatever drink the guest may desire.

To buy an ordinary whisky-and-soda is impossible; it would render the proprietors, the staff and the consumer liable to execution in the Tower. To buy a bottle of whisky, however,

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and have twelve whiskies-and-sodas is a great and meritorious deed. Which is a remarkable state of affairs, but I feel sure it has made somebody happy.

Now, if I have written at some length on this peculiar anomaly of the licensing laws, it is because there may be people who know not the Pointed Shoes of London, and who would rightly regard such an artificial absurdity as an invention on my part. And it is essential that they should realise the conditions that existed at the Pointed Shoe if they are to appreciate one of the cleverest murders ever planned, and still more the brilliant manner in which it was detected.

On the night in question the place was almost full up at two o'clock. The room is long and narrow, and is especially adapted to allow the minimum of people to dance with the maximum of discomfort. Which, as all the world knows, is the goal aimed at by every night club. At the end opposite the entrance door a gaily-uniformed band was playing really well. From table to table moved Captain Coombe—late of His Majesty's Royal Loamshires—chatting with his guests, most of whom were regular *habitués* of the place. A haze of tobacco smoke hung like a pall. At times the conversation drowned the music.

Taken as a whole, the crowd was a smart one. Quite a number of the sweet girlish faces that are repeated week by week in the society papers could be seen; a couple of earls, two well-known actors, and a sprinkling of Guardsmen

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supplied the male attendants. And it was during one of those sudden lulls that sometimes occur that the door was flung open and a large, rather red-faced man came in with a woman. Coombe was at my table at the time, and I heard his muttered "Damn!" And the reason was not far to seek.

The red-faced man was John Forfar, and it was clear at a glance that he had not confined himself to water during the evening. His blustering "Hi! you!" to a waiter came distinctly across the room; then the babel of conversation broke out again.

But the cause of Captain Coombe's annoyance was not the fact that John Forfar was a little in liquor. Such a condition was not unknown in the Pointed Shoe. Nor was it due to the fact that the lady with him was one of those that the Greeks had a word for. Again, such ladies were not unknown in the Pointed Shoe. The reason of his expletive lay in the composition of the party seated at the next table but one to ours. For amongst that party was Tony Elgin.

And now I must once again digress for the benefit of those whose paths lie far from London.

Everybody knew that Tony Elgin was in love with John Forfar's wife. Including John Forfar. Of the lady's feelings on the matter no one was quite so sure. Being a woman, she was naturally aware of the fact; but whether she reciprocated the sentiment I, for one, am unable to say.

Certainly, she gave no hint of it in public, whereas Tony's every movement proclaimed

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his state of mind from the housetops. His eyes followed her from the time she entered a room till the time she left it. Never a bright conversationalist, his mind became a complete blank on such occasions, so that he mumbled incoherently, and men fled from his presence.

Admittedly, Sheila Forfar was an adorable creature, and why she had married her husband John was one of those insoluble mysteries that everyone had given up trying to solve years ago. He was flagrantly unfaithful to her, and took not the slightest pains to conceal his infidelities. But for some strange reason she would not divorce him.

It was no question of money—she had plenty of her own. I do not think it was religion—she certainly was not a Catholic. But she was not a woman who gave her confidence easily, and so to the mystery of why she married him in the first place was added the even greater one of why she did not get rid of him now.

Fortunately, she herself was not in Tony Elgin's party, and he had his back to the table which John Forfar had taken. But it could only be a question of time before the two men saw one another, and one had an uncomfortable feeling that then there might be trouble, in spite of the publicity of the place. Everybody knew Tony Elgin's opinion of John Forfar. Including John Forfar. And though Tony was one of the most delightful men you could meet, he had the devil of a temper when it was roused.

A bottle of whisky and one of champagne for

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the lady had appeared on Forfar's table, and it soon became evident that he was proposing to make a night of it. In rapid succession he lowered three of the very strongest, so that even his fair companion began to shake her head at him. And still Tony was oblivious of his presence.

Then Forfar got up to dance, and almost simultaneously Tony rose too.

"The fat," said little Anne Dornoch, "is shortly going to be in the gas-stove, my pet. Only the Crystal Palace would be big enough for those two to-night."

And she was right. At no time a brilliant performer, when in wine Forfar was positively a menace. He seemed to regard the floor as a space on which he could move at speed in a straight line. If anybody got in his light, so much the worse for the other. And fate decreed that just as Tony was passing our table Forfar, backing across the room like a bull, took him and his partner fairly amidships, and literally almost knocked them down.

Now, let it be clearly understood, in justice to everyone, I am quite convinced that Forfar did not purposely run into Tony. He did not purposely run into anybody. But as an exhibition of execrable dancing it would have been hard to beat, especially on that tiny floor. And Tony, quite naturally, was not amused, even before he realised who it was who had done it. But when he did he lost his temper. He thought, as he told me afterwards, that Forfar had meant to do it.



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"Confound you, Forfar," he said angrily, "if you do that again I'll smash your face in."

Forfar dropped his partner, and his face grew mottled with fury.

"Will you really, Mr. Elgin?" he answered thickly. "Give my love to my wife when you see her again to-night."

It was an unspeakable thing to say, and it was said in an unspeakable way. And once again, in justice to everyone, I do not think even Forfar would have said it had he not been slightly drunk. But no one could blame Tony for standing not on the order of his answer.

"You ineffable swine," he said in a very clear voice. "Some day some lucky man is going to kill you."

And then Captain Coombe came hurrying up. Though not many people heard the actual words used, all heads were craning in our direction, and conversation had practically ceased. Tony's partner had hurriedly sat down; the lady friend had gone back to Forfar's table. And Coombe, who was a little man, performed a deed of great valour. He got between the two men who were glaring at one another over his head.

"Gentlemen," he said quietly, "I must really ask you to control yourselves. It makes it so unpleasant for all my other guests."

He half led, half pushed Tony to his seat, and after a moment's indecision Forfar resumed his. The band played a new tune; the tension relaxed. And in a few moments the Pointed Shoe had resumed the even tenor of its way.

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"It's a funny thing," remarked Ronald Standish thoughtfully, "how near the primitive we all are. Had Tony had a gun then, he might easily have shot that swine dead. For from such a situation does murder so often arise."

"But they'd never have hanged him," cried Anne.

"No, Anne, they wouldn't have hanged him. At least probably not. But they'd have given him a nice long spell at His Majesty's expense. And you must always remember that in the eyes of the great British public, Tony is the villain of the piece. Sheila is Forfar's wife. Do you feel like shaking a leg?"

They rose to dance, and I sat on, watching covertly. Tony was being petted and cajoled into a better temper, but he was obviously still in a towering rage. And suddenly he saw me and came over.

"Did you hear what that — said, Bob?" he asked.

"I did, old boy," I said. "I couldn't help it. But don't forget he's half tight."

"I don't give a damn whether he is or not," he answered. "But he and I are going to have things out before the night is through."

He returned to his seat, and I glanced at Forfar's table. He was still punishing the whisky, and it seemed to me that the woman was trying to get him to leave.

"Very awkward," said a voice in my ear. "What was it about?"

Coombe was standing beside me.

"Forfar barged into Elgin at a rate of

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knots," I said, " and darned near knocked him down. But I think it was accidental. Do they often come here ? "

" Elgin very rarely. But that man Forfar is in here two or three times a week, and I wish to Heaven he'd stay away. He's never actually given any trouble before, but the staff detest him."

" Who is the woman with him ? " I asked perfunctorily.

He shrugged his shoulders.

" A new one on me," he said. " What is it ? "

A waiter had come up, and for a moment or two I stared at him. Seldom have I seen a man who looked so desperately ill. His face was dead white, save for an angry spot of colour in each cheek, and his eyes glowed with an unnatural brightness.

" Mr. Forfar wants to speak to me ? " Coombe was saying. " All right ; I'll come."

" That waiter looks pretty sick," I remarked as the man left.

" I didn't notice," said Coombe. " They come and go, these fellows. I wonder what the deuce Forfar wants to see me about. Hallo ! the lady is going."

I looked across the room. Coombe was right. She was standing up, putting on her wrap, and was obviously giving Forfar a bit of her mind. I grinned happily. Most assuredly was she of the type who would call a spade a spade. Also most assuredly was she doing so now.

She paused, and evidently seemed to be

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giving him one last chance of going with her. But he shook his head sullenly and sat on. And with a snap of her fingers in his face, she swept out of the room just as Coombe approached the table. Then Anne and Ronald returned, and my attention wandered. Periodically during the next half-hour I saw him drinking morosely, with his heavy features set in a permanent scowl, but I was no longer interested.

And then it happened. The whole thing was so sudden that it almost stunned one. No one was dancing ; two entertainers were singing an extremely *risqué* song. The waiters were standing motionless at one end of the room ; everyone was seated at their tables. Came the most dreadful bellow of pain, and John Forfar lurched on to the floor. His face was distorted with agony ; animal-like noises were coming from his lips. Tottering, staggering, he got half-way across the floor towards Tony Elgin's table. Then with a final croak of " You . . . murderer ! " he pitched forward on his face and lay still.

For a space there was silence, utter silence. The whole room sat petrified, as if turned to stone. Then came a woman's piercing scream, instantly stifled, as Coombe walked slowly up to the body and turned it over. Then abruptly he knelt down, and I saw him take a deep sniff.

" Standish," he said curtly. " Come here, will you ? "

Ronald crossed the floor, and Coombe whispered something in his ear.

" Not a doubt about it," answered Ronald

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gravely. "Will you tell them, or shall I? No one must leave the room."

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Coombe quietly. "I'm afraid you will all have to remain here until the police come. I realised at once, and Mr. Standish confirms it, that this is not a case of natural death. Mr. Forfar has been poisoned with prussic acid, which means it is a question of suicide or—murder."

And as Ronald covered the dead man's face with a pocket handkerchief, I noticed a piece of paper clutched in Forfar's right hand.

I have spent many unpleasant quarters of an hour in my life, but I think the one that elapsed before the arrival of the police was the worst. People talked in whispers, trying not to look at the thing that lay sprawling on the floor. And then some fool woman had hysterics, which might have started the whole lot off had not the man with her thrown a glass of water in her face and told her to shut 'up.

"How did he do it?" asked Anne as Ronald came back to the table. She was sitting holding my hand very tight, and her eyes seemed enormous in her little face.

"It's in the whisky, Anne. The bottle reeks of it."

"But—but was it murder?"

"I can't tell you, dear. I don't know. But it points that way."

"Why?" she whispered.

"Because if Forfar had wished to commit suicide he'd have put the poison in the glass and not in the bottle."

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"Who could have done it?" I barely heard the half-breathed question.

"That," said Ronald gravely, "is what the police will have to try to find out."

"Could it have been that woman who was with him?"

"No," I remarked. "It could not. I personally saw him drink at least three times from that bottle after she left him."

"You're certain of that, Bob?" asked Ronald quickly.

"Positive," I said.

"Because that is a very important piece of evidence. It conclusively lets her out. And I'm thinking this may be a question of elimination."

"You've dismissed the idea of suicide entirely?"

"Not entirely. But as I said to Anne, why put the stuff in the bottle?"

And at that moment Tony Elgin came over to our table.

"May I interrupt?" he remarked gravely. "It's rather important."

"Sit down, Tony," said Ronald.

"That note in Forfar's hand. Is it necessary that the police should see it?"

"Essential," said Ronald. "It may have a very important bearing on the case."

"It hasn't."

"How do you know?"

"Because I wrote it."

Anne's grip tightened on my hand.

"Sorry, Tony," said Ronald after a pause.

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"But it would be quite out of the question to remove it now. Apart from any other reason, the whole room would see it being done, and someone would most certainly tell the police. Is there anything very private in it?"

"Yes. A woman's name."

And once again there was a pause. We all knew who the woman was.

"I'm afraid it can't be helped, old man," said Ronald. "The police will have to see it. Incidentally, here they are now, with McIver in charge."

Inspector McIver, followed by two plain-clothes men and a uniformed constable, had entered the room and was talking to Coombe. Then with a curt nod he crossed the floor and bent over the body, while a breathless silence settled on the room. It was as if the curtain were going up on the first act of a play.

His examination was brief but thorough. Then, prising open the dead man's fingers, he extracted the note. He read it, and glanced round the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said quietly. "I gather that you realise what has happened. Mr. Forfar has died as the result of swallowing prussic acid. It may have been self-administered; it may not. May I ask, to start with, who is the writer of this note?"

"I am," said Tony, and McIver came over to our table.

"Good evening, Mr. Standish," he remarked on seeing Ronald. "I take it you saw the whole thing?"

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"I did," said Ronald. "It was I who told Captain Coombe that no one must leave till you came."

"Thank you. You did perfectly right. Now, sir," he continued, turning to Tony, "you say you wrote this note. What is your name?"

"Anthony Elgin."

"Who is the Sheila you refer to?"

"Mrs. Forfar."

"The dead man's wife?"

Tony nodded, and McIver gave him a penetrating glance from under his shaggy eyebrows.

"You say in this note, Mr. Elgin: 'You foul blackguard, how dare you bandy Sheila's name about in public?' I gather you know the lady well?"

"I do," said Tony.

"Am I to understand that it was to-night Mr. Forfar was bandying his wife's name about?"

"That is so," answered Tony.

"What exactly took place?"

"He barged into me while I was dancing, and then made the most offensive reference to Mrs. Forfar."

"Yes. And what did he say?"

"He asked me," said Tony after a momentary pause, "to give her his love when I saw her again to-night."

Once again came that penetrating look from McIver.

"Indeed. But that hardly seems to me to be very offensive, Mr. Elgin."

Tony hesitated and Ronald cut in quietly:



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"Don't try to hide things, Tony. It will do no good."

"Very well. It was peculiarly offensive, inspector, because Forfar knew that I had taken his wife home from a theatre, and that she had retired for the night."

"I see. May I ask if there is any reason why that remark should be peculiarly offensive to you personally?"

"I am a very great friend of the lady," said Tony curtly.

McIver glanced at the note again.

"You go on to say: 'If you have the guts of a louse, come outside and take the thrashing you so richly deserve.' Did you have any reply?"

"No. I saw him come back into the room and read it. Then he picked up the bottle of whisky and took a drink neat. And the next moment he was dead."

"So that when you sent the note over to his table he was not in the room?"

"I didn't send it over. I took it myself."

"You took it yourself?"

"I did. I wasn't sure if he had gone for good, but when I saw his cigarette-case on the table I knew he hadn't."

"So there was no one at the table?"

"No one. The woman who was with him earlier in the evening had gone."

"There had been a woman with him, had there? Do you know who she was?"

"Not an idea."

"She's no help, McIver," put in Ronald.

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"She left about half an hour before it happened, and Mr. Leyton saw Forfar drink on two or three occasions out of the bottle after she had gone."

"That is so," I corroborated.

"Have you any idea," McIver asked me, "how long it was before he died that he took his last drink in safety?"

"I can't say if it was his last," I said, "but he certainly drank from that bottle a quarter of an hour before the end."

"One more question, Mr. Elgin." He turned back to Tony. "Do you remember if the cork was in or out of the bottle when you took the note over?"

"I am almost sure it was out, but I would not swear to it."

"Thank you." McIver closed his notebook, and Tony, getting up, went back to his own table.

"I gather," continued the inspector to Ronald, "that the dead man's last words were 'You . . . murderer!' Have you any idea to whom he was speaking?"

"To be perfectly frank, McIver, I think he was speaking to Mr. Elgin," said Ronald promptly. "I think he believed Elgin had poisoned him. Which, on the face of it, is absurd."

"Why, Mr. Standish?"

"My dear fellow, does one come to a place of this sort with a bottle of prussic acid in one's pocket?"

"Not a very good argument, Mr. Standish,

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for someone evidently *has* done so. The prussic acid was not in the bottle a quarter of an hour before he died ; it was there when he died. It can't have got there by itself."

"I say, Inspector," said Coombe, coming over to us, "can you let some of these people go now ? They're getting very restless."

"In a few moments, Captain Coombe. Just now I would like to speak to the waiter who was looking after Mr. Forfar."

Coombe made a sign, and the same waiter whose appearance I had noticed before came up.

"You were waiting at Mr. Forfar's table ?" said McIver.

"I was, sir."

"What is your name ?"

"George Parsons."

"Now, Parsons, I want you to answer a few questions. After the lady who was with Mr. Forfar left, who, if anyone, went to his table ?"

"I saw Captain Coombe, sir, talking to him."

"That is so," interrupted Coombe. "He wanted to know when the singing was going to begin."

"And except for him," continued the waiter, "I saw no one come to the table except that gentleman over there."

He indicated Tony.

"Was Mr. Forfar at the table then ?"

"No, sir."

"Did you see what that gentleman did ?"

"He put a note under Mr. Forfar's cigarette-case."

"Anything else ?"

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"He took his handkerchief out of his pocket, sir."

"What do you mean? To blow his nose or what?"

"No, sir. He did not blow his nose. I don't know what he did with it, because he half turned his back to me."

"And how long did he remain with his handkerchief out of his pocket while his back was turned to you?"

"A few seconds, sir."

"Have you no idea what he was doing?"

"None, sir."

"Could he have picked up the bottle of whisky?"

"He might have, but I can't say that he did."

"When was the last occasion on which you saw Mr. Forfar take a drink from the bottle in safety?"

"Just before he left the room, sir. I brought him another siphon."

"Did anyone except Mr. Elgin go to the table while Mr. Forfar was absent?"

"No, sir. Of that I am positive."

"All right, Parsons, thank you. That will do. You can tell your guests, Captain Coombe, that they may go now. Keep all the staff, and if you would care to stop, Mr. Standish, I shall welcome your assistance."

He walked over to Tony's table and said a few words to him. It was not difficult to guess their purport, for Tony turned as white as a sheet.

"Surely he can't think that Tony did it," cried Anne indignantly.

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I said something reassuring, but I noticed that Ronald looked a little worried.

"I wish he hadn't gone over to the table when Forfar was out," he said. "No one in their senses could believe he'd do such a thing, but the bald fact remains that somebody put the stuff in the bottle while Forfar was absent."

The room had emptied, and suddenly Tony got up and came to our table.

"That police merchant suspects me," he said quietly. "He hasn't told me that he does in so many words, but it's sticking out a yard. It's farcical, Ronald," he continued angrily. "A bloke doesn't go to a night club with bottles of poison all over him. What the devil are they looking for now?"

McIver and his satellites were making a thorough search of the seats and chairs, and I noticed that McIver himself was concentrating particularly on those at which Tony's party had sat. And suddenly, to my unmitigated horror, he plunged his hand into the space between the seat and the back and withdrew a small bottle. He took one sniff at it and then came over to us.

"How do you account for this, Mr. Elgin?" he asked gravely. "It is obvious from the smell that it contained prussic acid, and I found it just where you were sitting."

"I can't account for it," said Tony steadily. "I certainly did not put it there. And I can only say that whoever did is merely trying to throw suspicion on me. He knows I quarrelled with Forfar, and that's why he has singled me

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out. Confound it all, Inspector, I didn't even know Forfar was coming here to-night. So how could I have brought prussic acid to kill him? And I suppose you're not going to suggest that I brought it to kill anyone else. The whole thing is a plant; it's obvious."

"Of course it is, Tony," cried Anne.

"Look here, McIver," said Ronald. "I've got an idea which may help us. Test the bottle of whisky, and that empty bottle in your hand for fingerprints. Not that you'll get much, I'm afraid, but it can do no harm."

"I was naturally going to do that in any event, Mr. Standish," remarked McIver a little stiffly, and beckoning to the sergeant he crossed the room to Forfar's table.

"It's a positive nightmare, Ronald," said Tony. "God knows I had no cause to love the man, but to be accused of poisoning him seems like a fantastic dream. I keep pinching myself to make sure I'm awake."

"My dear Tony," said Ronald, "don't you get hit up about it. It is obvious, of course, that someone has taken advantage of an unusual set of circumstances to try to make you the scapegoat. We'll euchre him somehow. Well, McIver, what luck?"

"None, Mr. Standish. I hardly expected it. On the empty poison bottle the only finger-prints are my own. On the whisky bottle, the only prints are Mr. Forfar's. Five perfect ones as clear as you could want. But naturally a glove or a handkerchief was used. What on earth is the matter?"

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For Ronald was standing up, literally shaking with excitement.

"Five," he shouted. "*Only* five."

"What more do you want? Four fingers and a thumb."

"And no others?"

"No. Why should there be?"

"McIver, you're mad. Coombe—come here. You keep a record, I take it, of all the drinks bought each night?"

"Yes. And it can be checked next door at the wine merchant's."

"How many bottles of Haig whisky have been ordered to-night?"

"Louis can tell us."

He summoned the head waiter.

"How many bottles of Haig have you ordered to-night, Louis?"

"Three, sir. One for Lord Glasstown; it is there on his table. One for Mr. Jacobstein; there it is on his table. And one for Mr. Forfar, which the inspector has in his possession."

Ronald looked nonplussed, and we all stared at him in bewilderment.

"What's the great idea, Mr. Standish?" said McIver with faint derision.

"I can't be wrong," cried Ronald, "I can't be. Coombe—can you get hold of the wine merchant's place?"

"Easily. Louis, ask Mr. Tracy to come down here, will you? And to bring his record of sales."

"What's stung him, Bob?" said Tony eagerly. "Is he on to something?"

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"Looks like it," I answered. "Though what it is is beyond me."

"This is Tracy," said Coombe as a clean-shaven young man came in with a book in his hand.

"Good evening, Mr. Tracy," said Ronald. "Can you tell us how many bottles of Haig whisky you've sold to-night?"

"Four," answered the other promptly. "Three to Louis, according to the ordinary routine, and one to a waiter."

"So," said Ronald quietly. "Can you identify the waiter?"

"Easily, if he's here. He said he was feeling ill, and he looked it. There he is." He pointed to George Parsons.

"Well, Parsons," said Ronald, "what have you got to say? Where is that bottle of whisky?"

"Come forward," ordered McIver curtly, as the man hung back. "Where is that bottle of whisky?"

"I've drunk it," muttered Parsons sullenly.

"Send the sergeant, McIver," said Ronald, "to search for an empty bottle of Haig in the back premises. Or there may be a little left in it. Tell him to use a glove, for it will be covered with Mr. Forfar's finger-prints. In other words, he will find the bottle out of which Mr. Forfar has drunk the whole evening, until Parsons substituted the one that was found on his table after his death, and in which he had previously inserted the prussic acid."

And suddenly the waiter drew himself up defiantly.



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"You've got me all right," he said, "though I don't know how. Yes, I murdered him, as I always said I would. And I don't regret it. The only thing I regret is trying to saddle the blame on Mr. Elgin. I only did that because they had that quarrel. I'm sorry. I've no excuse for that."

"I warn you," said the inspector, "that anything you say may be used as evidence."

Parsons laughed.

"Let it be," he said. "You'll have to try me mighty quick, inspector, if you want to try me at all." He pointed to his chest. "One of them has gone, and the other is as full of holes as a colander. I knew Forfar came here a lot, so I got a job as a waiter. And I've been lying up for him for weeks. At first I meant to tip the poison into his own bottle, but I found it was too risky. Someone would be bound to see me do it. Then I got the idea of substituting a bottle of the same brand, just as that gentleman has said—though how he found out is beyond me.

"But what you want to know, I suppose, is why I killed him. It's an old story now, but some stories remain new—with the principal actors. It had all the ingredients of full-blooded melodrama. A girl: the man she was engaged to as the youthful hero—you wouldn't think I was under forty, would you? And the villain, top hat and all. But it didn't end as stage melodramas end. No happily ever after business this time. It ended in a poor, bedraggled thing being pulled out of the slime of

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the Thames. I heard he was ostracised at his club for a bit over the matter. Then it was forgotten, except by me."

He laughed again.

"Sorry I can't be more original. Sorry I can't even make a good story out of it. You see—I'm tired; terribly tired; tired, thank God—unto death. And now that I've put 'Paid' to the account, nothing else matters."

And with one last look at the motionless thing on the floor, Parsons, with the inspector's hand on his shoulder, passed through the silent staff and was gone.

"Poor devil," said Tony gravely. "I'm sorry for him. But how did you spot it, Ronald?"

"Five fingerprints, Tony; and *only* five. On a bottle from which Forfar had been drinking the whole evening! It was impossible. The bottle on his table could only have been drunk out of once. Therefore it was *not* the bottle from which he had been drinking; it was one that had been substituted. And the problem, instead of being the very difficult one of who added the poison, became the extremely simple one of who did the substitution. Simple, because it was almost a certainty that the stuff would be bought from Mr. Tracy, since it couldn't be obtained until Forfar himself had decided what he was going to drink. Still, I agree with you: I'm sorry for the poor devil."



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"I'm afraid I must be terribly materialistic and dull, my dear Anne. I quite agree with you that the house ought to have a ghost, and if I could I'd order one from Hartridges. But the prosaic fact remains that so far as I know we just aren't honoured."

Sir John Crawsham smiled at the girl on his right and helped himself to a second glass of port.

"We've got, I believe, a secret passage of sorts," he continued. "I've never bothered to look for it myself, but the legend goes that Charles the First lay hidden in it for two or three days. The only trouble about that is, that if His Majesty had hidden in all the secret rooms he is reputed to have stayed in he'd never have had time to do anything else."

"We must have a hunt for it one day, Uncle John," sang out his nephew David from the other end of the table.

"With all the pleasure in the world, my dear boy. I've got a bit of doggerel about it somewhere, which I'll look up after dinner."

"How long have you had the house, Sir John?" asked Ronald Standish.

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"Two months. Incidentally, Standish, though I can't supply a ghost, I can put up a very strange story which is more or less in your line of country."

"Really," said Ronald. "What is it?"

Sir John pushed the decanter to his left.

"It happened about forty years ago," he began. "At the time the house was empty; the tenants were abroad, the servants had either been dismissed or put on board wages. The keys were with the lodge-keeper, and two or three times a week he used to come up to open the windows and generally see that everything was all right. Well, one morning he arrived as usual and proceeded to unlock the doors of all the rooms, according to his ordinary routine. Until, to his great surprise, he came to the music-room and found that the key was missing. The door was locked but there was no key.

"He searched on the floor, thinking it might have fallen out of the keyhole; no sign of it. And so after a while he went outside, got a ladder, and climbed up to look through the mullioned windows. And there, lying in the middle of the floor, he saw the body of a man.

"The windows in that room are of the small diamond-paned type and are not easy to see through. But Jobson—that was the lodge-keeper's name—realised at once that something was badly amiss and got hold of the police, who proceeded to break open the door. And there an appalling sight confronted them.

"Stretched on his back in the middle of the room was a dead man. But it was the manner

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of his death that made the sight so terrible. The lower part of his face had literally been battered into a pulp; the assault must have been one of unbelievable ferocity. I say assault advisedly, since it was obvious at once that there could be no question of suicide or accident. It was murder, and a particularly brutal one at that. But when they'd got that far, they found things weren't so easy.

"From the doctor's examination it appeared that the man had been dead for about thirty-six hours. Jobson had not been to the house the preceding day, and so it was clear that the crime had been committed two nights before the body was found. But how had the murderer escaped? The door, as I've told you, was locked on the inside, which showed that the key had been deliberately taken from the outside and placed on the in. The windows were all bolted, and a very short examination proved that it was impossible to fasten them from outside the house. Therefore the murderer could not have escaped through a window and shut it after him. How, then, had he escaped?

"Wait a moment!" Sir John laughed. "I know what you're all going to say. Through the secret passage, of course. All I can tell you is that the most exhaustive search failed to reveal one. Short of actually pulling down the walls, they did everything they possibly could, so I gathered from the man who told me the yarn."

"And no trace of any weapon was found?" remarked Ronald.

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"Not a sign. But apparently, from the injuries sustained, it must have been something like a crowbar."

"Was the dead man identified?" I asked.

"No. That was another strange feature of the case. He had no letters or papers on him, and his clothes proved to have been bought in a big ready-made shop in Birmingham. They found the assistant who had served him some weeks previously, but he was of no help. The man had paid on the spot and taken the clothes away with him. And that, I'm afraid, is all that I can do for you in the ghost line," he finished with a smile.

"Did the police have no theory at all?" asked Ronald.

"They had a theory right enough," said Sir John. "Burglary was at the bottom of it; there is some vague rumour that a lot of old gold plate is hidden somewhere in the house. At any rate, the police believed that two men broke in to look for it, bringing with them a crowbar in case it should be necessary to smash down the walls. They then quarrelled, and one of them bashed the other in the face with it, killing him on the spot. And then somehow or other the murderer got away."

Sir John pushed back his chair.

"After which gruesome contribution to the evening's hilarity," he remarked, "who is for a game of slosh?"

There were a dozen of us altogether in the house-party, and everyone knew everyone else fairly intimately. Our host, a good-looking

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man in the early fifties, was a bachelor, and his sister Mary Crawsham kept house for him. He was a man of considerable wealth, being one of the partners in Crawsham's Cable Works. The other two were his nephews, David and Michael, sons of the late Sir Wilfred Crawsham, John's elder brother. He had died of pneumonia five years previously, and when his will was read it was found that he had left his share of the business equally to his two sons, who were to be automatically taken into partnership with their uncle.

As a result, the two young men found themselves at a comparatively early age in the pleasant possession of a very large income. Wilfred's share had been considerably larger than his brother's, and so, even when it was split into two, each half was but little less than Sir John's portion. Fortunately, neither of them was of the type that is spoiled by wealth, and two nicer fellows it would have been hard to meet. David was the elder and quieter of the two: Michael—a harum-scarum youth, though quite shrewd when it came to business—spent most of his spare time proposing to Anne Horley, who had started the ghost conversation at dinner.

The party was by way of being a house warming. Though Sir John had actually had the house for two months, the decorators had only just moved out finally. Extra bathrooms had been installed and the whole place had been modernised. But the work had been done well and the atmosphere of the place had been kept



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—particularly on the ground floor, where, so far as was possible, everything was as it had been when the house was built.

And especially was this true of the room of the mysterious murder—the music-room, into which everyone had automatically trooped after dinner. It possessed a lofty ceiling from which there hung in the centre a large and immensely heavy chandelier. Personally, I thought it hideous, but I gathered it was genuine and valuable. It had been wired for electricity, but the main lighting effect came from lamps dotted about the room. A grand piano—Mary Crawshaw was no mean performer—stood not far from the huge fire-place, on each side of which were inglenooks with their original paneling. The chairs, though in keeping, could be sat on without getting cramp; there was no carpet on the floor, but several valuable Persian rugs. Opposite the fire-place was the musicians' gallery, reached by an old oak staircase. Facing the door were the high windows, through which Jobson had peered nearly half a century ago and seen what lay in the room.

"The bloodstain is renewed every week, my dear," said Sir John jocularly to one of the girls.

"But where exactly was the body, Uncle John?" cried Michael.

"From what I gather, right in the centre of the room. Of course, it was furnished very differently then, but there was a clear space in the middle and that was where he was lying."

"What do you make of it, Ronald?" said David.

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"Good Heavens! My dear fellow, don't ask me to solve the mystery," laughed Standish. "Things of that sort are hard enough, even when you've got all the clues red hot. But when they're forty years old——"

"Still, you must have some idea," persisted Anne Horley.

"You flatter me, Anne. And I'm afraid that the only solution I can see might spoil it as well as solve it. Providing everything was exactly as Sir John told us—and you must remember it took place a long time ago—I think that the police theory is almost certainly correct as far as it goes."

"But how could the man get away?"

"I am quite sure they knew how he got away, but that part has been allowed to drop so as to increase the mystery. Through the door."

"But it was locked on the inside."

Ronald smiled.

"I should say it would take a skilled man with the right implement five minutes at the very most to lock that door from the outside, the key being on the inside. Which brings us to an interesting point. Why should he have troubled to do so? He had just killed his pal; so his first instinct would be to get away as fast as he could. Why, therefore, did he delay even five minutes? Why not lock the door from the outside and put the key in his pocket? He can't have been concerned with staging a nice mystery for future owners of the house; his sole worry at the moment must have been to hop it as rapidly as possible."

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He lit a cigarette.

"You know, little things of that sort always annoy me until I can get, at any rate, a possible solution. Why do laundries invariably send back double-cuffed shirts with the holes for the links at least an inch apart? Why do otherwise sane people persist in believing that placing a poker upright in front of a fire causes it to draw up?"

"But of course it does," cried Anne indignantly.

"Only, my angel, because at long last you leave the fire alone and cease to poke it." He dodged a book thrown at his head, and continued. "Why did that man take the trouble to do what he did? What was in his mind? What possible purpose did he think he was serving? That, to my mind, Sir John, is the really interesting part of your problem. But then I'm afraid I'm a base materialist."

"Then you don't think there is a secret passage at all?" said Michael.

"I won't say that. But I think if there had been one leading out of this room, the police would have found it."

"Well, I think you're quite wrong," remarked Anne scornfully. "In fact, you almost deserve to be addressed as my dear Watson. What happened is pathetically obvious to anyone except a half-wit. These two men came for the gold plate. They locked the door to ensure they should not be disturbed. Then they searched for the secret passage and found it. There it was, yawning in front of them. At the

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other end—wealth. On which bright thought Eustace—he's the murderer—sloshes Clarence in the meat trap, so as to get a double share, and legs it along the passage. He finds the gold, and suddenly gets all hit up with an idea. He will leave the house by the other end of the passage. So he goes back; shuts the secret door into this room, and hops it the other way. What about that, my children?"

"Bravo!" cried Ronald, amidst a general chorus of applause. "It's an uncommonly good solution, Anne. It gets rid of my difficulty, and *if* there is a secret passage I wouldn't be at all surprised if you aren't right."

"If! My poor child, what you lack is feminine intuition. Had women been in charge of this case it would have been solved thirty-nine years and eleven months ago. I despair of your sex. Come on, children: let's go and dance. I'm tired of ancient corpses."

The party trooped out into the hall, and Ronald strolled along the wall under the musicians' gallery, tapping the panelling.

"All sounds solid enough, doesn't it?" he remarked. "They certainly didn't go in for jerry-building in those days, Sir John."

"You're right," answered our host. "Each one of these walls is about three feet thick. I was amazed when I saw the workmen doing some plumbing upstairs before we moved in."

He switched out the lights and we joined the others in the hall, where dancing to the wireless had already started. And as I stood idly watching by the fire-place, and sensing the

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comfortable wealth of it all, I found myself wishing that I was a partner in Crawsham's Cable Works. I said as much to David, who looked at me, so I thought, a little queerly.

"I wouldn't say it to everybody, Bob," he remarked, "but I confess I'm a trifle surprised at things. I'd heard all about the new house, but I did not expect anything quite like this. Crawsham's Cable Works, old boy, have not been entirely immune from the general slump, though we haven't been hit so hard as most people. But that is for your ears only."

"He's probably landed a packet in gold mines," I said.

"Probably," he agreed with a laugh. "Don't think I'm accusing my reverend uncle of robbing the till. But this ain't a house: it's a ruddy mansion. However, I gather the shooting is excellent, so more power to his elbow. Which reminds me that it's an early start to-morrow, and I've got to see him on a spot of business. Night, night, Bob. That cup stuff is Aunt Mary's own hell-brew. I think she puts ink in it. As the road signs say—you have been warned."

Which was the last time I saw David Crawsham alive.

Even now, after a considerable lapse of time, I can still feel the stunning shock of the tragedy that took place that night. Big Ben had sounded: National had closed down, and a general drift bedwards took place. Personally, I was asleep almost as soon as my head touched the pillow, only to awake a few seconds later,

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so it seemed to me, with the sound of a heavy crash reverberating in my ears. For a while I lay listening. Had I dreamed it? Then a door opened and footsteps went past my room. I switched on the light and looked at my watch: it was half-past two.

Another door opened and I heard voices. Then a shout in Sir John's voice. I got up and, slipping on a dressing-gown, went out. Below I could hear Sir John talking agitatedly to someone, and as Ronald came out of his room, one sentence came up distinctly.

"For God's sake keep the women away!"

I followed Ronald down the stairs: Sir John was standing outside the music-room in his dressing-gown, talking to the white-faced butler.

"Ring up the doctor at once, and the police," he was saying, and then he saw us.

"What on earth has happened?" asked Ronald.

"David," cried his uncle. "The chandelier has fallen on him."

"What?" shouted Ronald, and darted into the music-room.

In a welter of gold arms and shattered glass the chandelier lay in the centre of the floor, and underneath it sprawled a motionless figure in evening clothes.

"Lift it off him," said Ronald quietly, and between us we heaved the thing clear. And a glance was sufficient to show that nothing could be done: David was dead. His shirt-front and collar were saturated with blood; his face was crushed almost beyond recognition. And one

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hand was nearly severed at the wrist, so deep was the cut in it.

"Poor devil," muttered Ronald, covering up his face. "Somebody had better break it gently to Michael. Keep everybody out, Bob. Ah! here is Michael."

"What is it?" cried the younger brother. "What's happened?"

"Steady, old man," said Ronald. "There's been a bad accident. The chandelier fell on David and crushed him."

"He's dead?"

"Yes, Michael, I'm afraid he is. I wouldn't look if I were you; it'll do no good."

"But in God's name how did it happen?" he cried wildly. "What on earth was the old chap doing here at this time of night? He was with you when I went to bed, Uncle John."

"I know he was," said Sir John. "We sat on talking over that tender for about half an hour, and then I went to bed, leaving him in my study. He said he would turn out the lights, and I can tell you no more. I fell asleep, until the frightful crash woke me up. I came down and found this. For some reason or other he must have been in here: he said something jokingly about the secret passage. And then this happened. Of all the incredible pieces of bad luck——"

Sir John was nearly distraught.

"I'll have that damned contractor ruined for this," he went on. "He should be sent to prison. Don't you agree, Standish?"

There was no answer and, glancing at Ronald,

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I saw that he was staring at the body with a look of perplexed amazement on his face.

"What's that?" he said, coming out of his reverie. "The contractor. I agree; quite scandalous."

He walked round and examined the top of the chandelier.

"Funny a chain wasn't used to hold it," he remarked. "Though this rope is obviously new, and should have been strong enough. What room is immediately above here, Sir John?"

"It's going to be my bedroom, but the fools put down the wrong flooring. I wanted parquet, so I made 'em take it up again. They're coming to do it next week."

"I see," said Ronald, and once again his eyes came back to the body with a look of absorbed interest in them. Then abruptly he left the room, and when I went into the hall, where the whole party were talking in hushed whispers, he was nowhere to be seen.

"It's that room, Mr. Leyton," said Miss Crawshaw to me between her sobs. "There's tragedy in it; something devilish. I know it. Poor Michael! He's gone all to pieces. He adored his brother."

And certainly the pall of tragedy brooded over the house. It was the suddenness of it; the stupid waste of a brilliant young life from such a miserable cause.

The doctor came, though we all knew it was merely a matter of form. I heard his report to Sir John.

"A terrible affair," he said gravely. "I



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must offer you my deepest sympathy. It is, of course, clear what happened : so clear that it is hardly necessary for me to say it. Your nephew was standing under the chandelier when the rope broke. He must have heard something and looked up. And the base of the chandelier struck him in the face. I am sure it will be a comfort to you to know, Sir John, that death must have been instantaneous. Of that I am certain. I shall, of course, wait for the police."

And at that moment I felt a hand on my arm. Ronald was standing beside me.

"Come into the billiard-room, Bob," he said in a low voice.

I followed him and threw a log on the dying fire. Then in some surprise I looked at him. Rarely had I seen him more serious.

"That doctor is a fool," he said abruptly.

"Why? What makes you say so?" I asked, amazed. "Don't you agree with him?"

For a space he walked up and down the room, his hands in the pockets of his dressing-gown. Then he halted in front of me.

"David's death was instantaneous all right; I agree there. But he wasn't standing underneath the chandelier when it fell."

"What was he doing then?"

"He was lying on the floor."

"Lying! What under the sun do you mean? Why was he lying on the floor?"

"Because," he said quietly, "he was dead already."

I stared at him in complete bewilderment.

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"How do you make that out?" I said at length.

"That very deep cut in his hand," he answered. "Had he received that at the same time as he received the blow in the face it would have bled profusely, just as his face did. Whereas, in actual fact, it hardly bled at all. There are some other scratches, too, obviously caused by breaking glass which show no signs of blood. And so I say, Bob, that without a shadow of doubt, David Crawsham was already dead when the chandelier fell on him."

"Then what killed him?"

"I don't know," said Ronald gravely. "But it is a significant point that if you eliminate the chandelier, David's death is identical with that of the man forty years ago. Both found lying in the centre of the room with their faces bashed in."

"Do you mean that you think there's something in the room?"

"I don't know what to think, Bob. If by something you mean some supernatural agency, I emphatically do *not* think. That wound was caused by a very material weapon, wielded by very material power."

"You think it quite impossible that for some strange reason the wound in his wrist did not bleed? That all the blood that flowed came from his face?"

"I think it quite impossible, Bob, that those two wounds were administered simultaneously."

"His face would have been hit first," I pointed out.

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"By the split fraction of a second. Damn it, man, his hand was almost severed from his arm. He ought to have bled there like a pig."

"In that case what are you going to do about it?"

He again began to pace up and down the room.

"Look here, Bob," he said at length, "as I see it, there are two possible alternatives. The first is that somebody murdered David by hitting him in the face with some heavy weapon. He then placed the body on the floor under the chandelier and, going up above to the room without floor boards, deliberately cut the rope."

"But the rope wasn't cut," I cried. "It was all frayed."

"My dear man," he answered irritably, "use your common sense. Would any man be such a congenital fool as not to fray out the two ends after he'd cut the rope? The whole thing must appear to be an accident. The top end which I went and had a look at is frayed just like the bit on the chandelier. But *that* proved nothing. It's what you would expect to find if it was an accident or if it wasn't. That's the first alternative. The second is, I confess, a tough 'un to swallow. It is that something—don't ask me what—struck David in the face with sufficient force to kill him. He fell where we found him, and later the rope supporting the chandelier broke, and the thing crashed down on him."

"But if something hit him, not wielded by a

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human agency, that something must still be in the room," I cried.

"I told you it was a tough 'un," he said. "And the first isn't too easy either. The blow wasn't on the back of the head. He must have seen it coming; he must have seen the murderer winding himself up to deliver it. Can we seriously believe that he stood stock still waiting to be hit? It's a teaser, Bob, a regular teaser."

"Well, old man," I remarked. "I have the greatest respect for your judgment, but I can't help thinking that in this case you're wrong. Who could possibly want to murder David? And though I realise the force of your argument about the wound in his wrist, it's surely easier to accept the doctor's solution than either of yours."

"Very much easier," he agreed shortly, and led the way back into the hall. The police had arrived and were taking notes in readiness for the inquest; the doctor had already left. The women had all gone back to their rooms. Only the men, with the exception of Michael, still stood about aimlessly.

I wondered if Ronald was going to say to the police what he had said to me, but he did not mention it. He gave his name, as I did mine—but as they obviously agreed with the doctor that the whole thing was an accident, the proceedings were merely a matter of routine.

At length they departed, having carried David's body to his room. And after a while we drifted away. The first streaks of dawn were beginning to show, and for a time I stood

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by the window smoking. And when at last I lay down it was not with any thought of sleeping. But finally I did doze off, to awake in a muck sweat from a nightmare in which some huge black object had come rushing at me out of space in the music-room.

The result of the inquest was a foregone conclusion. The building contractor produced figures to prove that the rope which had been used was strong enough to carry a weight twice as great as that of the chandelier, and that therefore he could not be held to blame for what must evidently have been a hidden flaw.

And so a verdict of accidental death was brought in, and in due course David Crawsham was buried. Only his aunt remained unconvinced, maintaining that there was a malevolent spirit in the room who had cut the rope deliberately. And Ronald. He did not say anything; on the face of it he acquiesced with the coroner's finding. But I knew he was convinced in his own mind that the verdict was wrong. And often during the months that followed I would find him with knitted brows staring into vacancy as he puffed at his pipe. But at last in the stress of other work he forgot it, until one day Michael caught Anne at the right moment and they became engaged. Which was the cause of our being again invited by Sir John to a party to celebrate the event.

The guests, save for ourselves and Anne, were all different from those who had been there when the tragedy occurred, and somewhat naturally no mention was made of it. The

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music-room was in general use, but there was one alteration. The chandelier had been removed.

"My sister insisted on it," said Sir John to me. "And I think she was right. A pity though in some ways; of its type it was very fine."

"Have you got any farther with finding the secret passage?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"No. Since the poor boy's death I haven't given the matter a second thought. What a ghastly night that was. I believe I've still got the paper somewhere," he said vaguely.

But one thing was clear; whatever Sir John had done, Ronald was giving it several second thoughts. Returning to the scene of the accident had brought the whole matter back to his mind, and I could see he was still as dissatisfied as ever.

"Not that it cuts any ice practically," as he said. "For good or ill, David was killed by the chandelier falling on him, and by no possible means could that verdict be shaken. Moreover, it would be a grave mistake to try and shake it now; the only result would be to upset Sir John and his sister, and lay oneself open to a severe rap on the knuckles for not having spoken at the time. But I'd give a lot, Bob, to know the truth about that night."

"Well, you're never likely to, old man," I answered, "so I'd give up worrying."

Which was where I went down to the bottom of the class; though even now the thing seems

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impossible. And yet it happened—happened the very evening I left. Ronald, who had stayed on, told me about it when he got back to London. Told me in short, clipped sentences with many pauses in between. Rarely have I seen him more savagely angry.

“I’m not a rich man, Bob, but I’d give ten thousand pounds to bring that swine to the gallows. . . . Who? . . . Sir John Crawsham. . . . He murdered David and, but for the grace of God, he’d have got Michael. . . . There’s only one thing to be said in his favour, if it can be regarded in that light; it was, I think, the cleverest scheme I have ever come across.

“We were all sitting in the hall after dinner last night, and the conversation turned on the secret passage. After a while, Sir John was prevailed on by Michael to go and get the paper on which the clues were supposed to be written, and Anne and Michael went into the music-room and started to try to solve it. I was playing bridge and could not go with them, and I’d have liked to.

“Suddenly, I heard Michael give a shout of triumph, and by the mercy of Allah I was dummy. Otherwise——”

He bit at his pipe angrily.

“I got up and went to the door of the music-room; Michael was standing in the right-hand inglenook, his hands on the panelling above his head, with Sir John beside him.

“‘He’s got it,’ cried Anne triumphantly, and there came a loud click. And then, Bob, number two solution flashed into my brain and

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I acted mechanically. I think some outside power made me move; I don't profess to say. I got to Michael, collared him round the knees and hurled him sideways, just as the panel slid open and out 'something' whizzed over our heads."

"Good God!" I muttered. "What was it?"

"The most wickedly efficient death-trap I have ever seen. As the door opened, it operated a catch in the roof of the passage behind it. As soon as the catch was withdrawn, a jagged mass of iron weighing over sixty pounds was released, and, swinging like a pendulum on the end of a chain, hurtled through the opening at a height of about five feet from the ground. Anyone standing in the opening would have taken it in the lower part of the face, and literally been hit for six.

"We stood there white and shaking, watching the thing swing backwards and forwards. As it grew slower we were able to check it, and as it finally came to rest, the door shut. The room was normal again. . . .

"I won't bore you, Bob, with a description of the mechanism. That it was of great age was clear; it had been installed when the house was built. Anyway, that's not the interesting point; *that* began to come in on me gradually. I suppose I was a fool; one is at times. But for a while the blinding significance of the thing didn't strike me. Then suddenly I knew. . . . Involuntarily, I looked at Sir John; and he was staring at me. . . . For a second our eyes held; then he looked



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away. . . . But in that second he knew that I knew. . . .”

Ronald rose and helped himself to a drink.

“I may be dense,” I remarked, “but I still don’t quite see. It is clear that that is the thing that killed David, but even then there’s no proof that Sir John was aware of it. From what you tell me, the door shut of its own accord.”

“As you say, that is the thing that killed David. As it killed that man forty years ago. And it lifted the body through the air with the force of the blow, and deposited it in the centre of the room. So much is obvious; the rest is surmise.

“Let us go back a little, Bob, and put a hypothetical case. And let us see how it fits in. A certain man—we will call him Robinson—was senior partner in a business. But though the senior, he drew but little more money from it than his two nephews. Which galled him.

“One day, Robinson happened to hear of a certain house—it is more than likely he got hold of some old document—which contained a very peculiar feature. It was for sale, and little by little a singularly devilish scheme began to mature in his mind. He studied it from every angle; he tested it link by link; and he found it perfect.

“He gave a house-warming party, where he enlarged upon an unsolved murder that had taken place years before. And late that night, after everyone else had gone to bed, he sat up with his elder nephew. After a while he turned

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the conversation to the secret passage, and they both went into the music-room to look for it. Robinson, in spite of his statements to the contrary, knew, of course, where it was. And very skilfully, by a hint here and a hint there, he let his nephew discover it, as he thought, for himself. With the result we know.

"Had it failed, Robinson's whole plan would have failed. But no suspicion would have attached to him. He knew nothing about this infernal device. It did not fail; there in the centre of the floor was one of his partners dead. Robinson's third had become a half.

"Quietly he goes upstairs and gets into pyjamas. Then he cuts the rope of the chandelier. You see, the essence of his scheme was that the death trap should not be discovered; he wanted to use it just once more. For the whole is much better than a half. I've told you how he did it; fortunately without success."

"But can't you go to the police, man?" I cried.

"What am I to say to 'em? What proof can I give them *now* that David was dead before the chandelier fell on him? Exhumation won't supply it; this isn't a poison case. I merely lay myself open to thundering damages for libel. Why, if I knew it, didn't I speak at the time?"

"How I wish you had!"

"Robinson would still have got off. Even if the chandelier hadn't killed David, it had fallen accidentally, and he knew nothing about the other thing."

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“ I suppose it isn't possible that it *did* fall accidentally, and that Sir John *did* know nothing about the other thing ? ”

Ronald gave a short laugh.

“ Perfectly possible, if you will answer me one question. Who replaced the weight in position ? ”

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RONALD STANDISH threw the paper across the table at me.

"You'd better get the outline into your head, Bob," he remarked. "We'll be hearing the details shortly."

I glanced at the open page: there was no doubt as to what he referred to:

"TERRIBLE TRAGEDY IN MIDLANDS.

"WELL-KNOWN HUNTING BARONET  
MURDERED.

"A shocking outrage occurred last night at Horsham Grange, near Melton Mowbray. Sir Peter Denne, a well-known figure in the hunting field, was brutally murdered in his study after dinner.

"It appears that the baronet, who was sixty-five years of age, retired to his study, according to his invariable custom, at nine o'clock, leaving his niece, Miss Muriel Padston, in the drawing-room at the other end of the

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house. At ten o'clock the butler, William Sinton, took the whisky tantalus and a siphon to his master as usual. On opening the door of the study he at first thought Sir Peter had gone out, as the french windows were wide open, and there was no sign of him in the room. But on going to the desk he was horrified to see the body of the unfortunate baronet lying on the carpet. A glance was sufficient to show that he was dead, and that the cause of death was a terrible wound in the head, which lay in a welter of blood.

"He rang up the police, and within a short time Inspector Drury and Dr. Deacon were on the scene. And it was at once apparent that a brutal crime had been committed. No trace of any weapon could be found, and it was therefore obvious that it was a case of murder and not suicide or accident. Sir Peter had been shot in the head at close range, by some form of sporting gun, probably, according to the doctor, a twelve-bore. The pellets had scattered very little, but there were no traces of scorching on the face. It is therefore estimated that the shot was fired at a range of some five or six feet.

"Inquiries amongst the staff, and of Miss Padston, elicited the fact that no shot had been heard by anyone. But since the study is at the far end of the house, and a considerable wind was blowing at the time, this is not surprising. The matter is a complete mystery, since Sir Peter was one of the most popular men in the district; but further developments may be expected shortly."

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I put down the paper.

"Seems clear enough so far as it goes," I remarked, "but it doesn't go very far. Who are you going to hear the details from?"

"Miss Muriel Padston herself," he answered. "She telephoned me this morning. I met her two or three years ago at a shooting party."

"Good looking?"

"Quite, so far as I remember. And a very good sort. I wonder what she can want with me."

"Presumably to consult you over this affair."

"My dear Bob," he grinned. "I didn't imagine she was coming up to London to ask me to choose her a hat. But as you so succinctly observed, the case does not seem a very difficult one, and it rather surprises me that she should come so post-haste. Anyway—*nous verrons*."

"Have you ever heard of Sir Peter before?"

"Never. But I've looked him up in 'Who's Who.' Thirteenth baronet, J.P., and all the usual dope. His son—the only child—was killed in the War. His wife died seven years ago."

"Who is the heir?"

"A nephew, Charles Denne."

"And the Padston girl is presumably his wife's niece."

Ronald nodded.

"Yes. Sir Peter married a Miss Mary Padston in 1895. So now you know as much of the family history as I do myself."

The bell rang as he spoke, and a moment or

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two later Parker announced Miss Padston. She was a tall, pretty girl of about twenty-five, though her eyes looked a bit swollen from weeping. But her voice was quite normal when Ronald introduced me.

"A shocking tragedy, Miss Padston," he said. "You have my deepest sympathy."

"A worse one may take place, Mr. Standish," was her somewhat surprising answer. "That's why I rushed up by car to see you."

"Take your time," said Ronald quietly. "And please begin right at the beginning."

He pushed over a box of cigarettes, but she shook her head.

"You've seen the account of it in the papers, of course?" she asked.

"I have seen that your uncle, Sir Peter Denne, was killed by being shot through the head. I have seen that the police consider it was murder, and that the weapon reputed to have been used was a twelve-bore. I have seen that the crime took place between nine and ten last night, and that nobody heard a shot. Now let's hear the rest, and as I said, take your time."

"Five years ago," she began, "I went to live at Horsham Grange with my uncle. It suited me down to the ground as I'm mad on hunting, and it suited him to have someone to run the house. Besides, we've always got on most awfully well together. He was such a dear——"

She paused for a moment and her lips quivered.

"Last night," she continued steadily, "we had dinner together as usual. But it was

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obvious that something had upset him. There is no good disguising the fact because I am sure Sinton, the butler, noticed it too."

"But why should you disguise the fact, Miss Padston?" asked Ronald. "It may have an extremely important bearing on the whole case."

"That's what the police think; but I know they're wrong," she cried. "You see, Mr. Standish, there has been one big bone of contention between my uncle and me for the past few months—my cousin, Charles Denne. In reality he isn't a cousin at all; at least, there is no blood relationship. At any rate, last December he came home from abroad, and being just as keen on hunting as the rest of the family, he took a small house about a mile from Horsham Grange.

"Unfortunately from the first Uncle Peter took a dislike to him. Why, I don't know; the whole thing was too unreasonable for words. Charles goes magnificently; he's very good looking, and he's the best of company. It's true he threw one or two parties where they played pretty high, but that would never have affected Uncle Peter in normal circumstances. Moreover, Charles went out of his way to break down this curious dislike, but without any success. It just was there—inexplicable, unreasoning.

"Sometimes I've thought it was because Charles was his heir. His son was killed on the Somme, and he may have subconsciously resented Charles as an interloper. He idolised his boy Harry, and he saw Charles coming into



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all that was rightfully his son's. But as Charles said to me, it wasn't his fault. It was nothing to do with him that he'd been born Sir Peter's nephew: it was nothing to do with him that Harry had been killed. And after a while Charles began to get fed up himself. And since the two men were continually meeting on the hunting field the situation grew more and more awkward.

"Then came the culminating blow." She gave a sudden very delightful smile. "I fear I don't quite know how to cast down my eyes modestly."

"But you and Charles fixed matters up," laughed Ronald.

"Exactly. And Uncle Peter was not amused. In fact, there was the most unholy row. Both men lost their tempers and abused one another like bargees, until I walked into the room and sent Charles home. Then I had a talk with Uncle Peter.

"Mr. Standish, one might as well have argued with a mule. He was adamant. He pulled out all the old stuff about being my guardian: said that Charles was a damned fortune-hunter—that, mark you, about his own heir——"

"One moment, Miss Padston," interrupted Ronald. "Is your money your own, or was it controlled by your uncle?"

"My own."

"Thank you. Go on."

"And finally wound up by informing me that never under any circumstances would he give

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his consent. Well, that was a bit too much, and I told him so. I pointed out that as I was over age he had no means of stopping me marrying whoever I liked, and that I proposed to do so. And with that the party broke up."

"How long ago was this?" asked Ronald.

"About two months. Now, as you will understand, Mr. Standish, I was awfully upset over the whole thing. Save for this one amazing bee in his bonnet over Charles, Uncle Peter was just the same old dear as ever. And I hated the thought of hurting his feelings. Charles was all for telling him to go to blazes, and getting married with or without his consent. But I talked it over with him and, after a while he agreed, rather reluctantly, to let me try and get round him."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It's been quite useless. Honestly I believe the poor darling was literally insane on that one point. The mere mention of Charles's name was enough to send him into a fit of ungovernable fury. And he would give no reason; that was the infuriating part of it all. If only he had mentioned some specific cause for his dislike I might have been able to cope with it, but he wouldn't. And so at last I realised it was useless going on, besides being unfair to Charles. So we decided we'd get married a month from now.

"I wanted to tell Uncle Peter myself, but Charles preferred to do it so that there should be no question of his appearing to funk it. And two days ago he did so. Apparently it was

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an accidental meeting in the village, and George told me about it."

"George? Who is George?" asked Ronald.

"Charles's cousin. He lives in London, and had stayed the previous night with Charles. And on his way back to Town he called in and saw me. Evidently there had been a hideous scene which ended in Uncle Peter actually going for Charles with his walking-stick. And the trouble is that it was witnessed by several people."

"Let's get these dates clear," said Ronald. "To-day is Thursday, so that it was on Tuesday that that happened."

"That's right."

"Did Charles come and see you that day?"

"No. I rang him up when George had gone, but he was out."

"When did you next see Charles?"

"Last night—after the tragedy. I was out myself all yesterday till dinner-time."

"But I think you said, Miss Padston, that it was yesterday evening that your uncle seemed upset at dinner. What had caused that?"

"Apparently they'd had another row yesterday afternoon."

"They certainly do not seem to have liked one another," remarked Ronald. "Where did this one take place?"

"In the park."

"And did anyone witness it?"

"Charles doesn't know. You see, when Sinton told me that Uncle Peter was dead I rang up Charles at once."

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"That would be just after ten o'clock last night. Was he in?"

She hesitated for a second.

"No. There was no answer at all."

"What about the servants?"

"A man and his wife look after him. And they go out every Wednesday."

"So you rang him up again later?"

"Yes. About twenty past ten. He answered, and I told him what had happened. He came over at once. And it was then he told me about the row yesterday afternoon. Oh! Mr. Standish, I *know* he didn't do it."

"My dear Miss Padston," said Ronald reassuringly, "I think you're alarming yourself most unnecessarily. On what you've told me there is no earthly reason to suppose that he did. Because two men have a quarrel—even a very bad quarrel—there is no reason for thinking that one of them is going to shoot the other hours afterwards in cold blood. Had he killed him in the heat of the moment the thing is understandable. But to walk a mile, as I say hours after, is a different matter. What object had he in killing your uncle? You and he were going to get married anyway."

The girl bit her lip.

"I haven't told you everything yet," she said. "While I was talking to Charles, Inspector Drury came into the room."

"'Have you been here long, Mr. Denne?'" he said.

"Charles told him he'd only just arrived."

"'Have you been round to the study?'"

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“ ‘No,’ said Charles.

“ ‘Nor outside the window?’

“ ‘I came straight in here to Miss Padston,’ Charles said a little irritably. “ ‘What are you driving at, Inspector?’

“ ‘Mr. Denne, are your initials C. T. D.?’

“ ‘They are,’ answered Charles.

“ ‘Then how comes a handkerchief bearing those initials to be in a rhododendron bush just by the study window?’

“ ‘He held it out, and Charles took it.

“ ‘It’s my handkerchief right enough, Inspector,” he said. ‘But how it came there I know no more than you.’

“ ‘And then it suddenly dawned on him what the inspector was driving at.

“ ‘Good God! man,’ he cried, ‘you don’t suppose I murdered my uncle, do you?’

“ ‘I suppose nothing, Mr. Denne,’ said the inspector. ‘But a terrible crime has been committed, and it is my duty to investigate it. Can you tell me your movements since eight o’clock?’

“ ‘Most certainly,’ answered Charles. ‘I fed at home at eight o’clock, and at about half-past nine I went for a walk, returning to my house at a quarter past ten. For that you will have to take my word since my servants always go out on Wednesday nights. Miss Padston rang me up five minutes later, telling me what had happened, and I came up here post-haste in my car.’

“ ‘Merely as a formality, Mr. Denne,’ said the inspector, ‘may I ask if you met anyone during your walk?’

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“ ‘Several people,’ said Charles quietly. ‘But since the implication in your question is obvious, I may as well say at once that I spoke to no one who can confirm my story. And since it was dark there is nobody who could have recognised me.’

“ With that the inspector left us, and Charles turned to me. Naturally he was most frightfully upset; it was evident that Drury suspected him. And that’s why I’ve come straight to you, Mr. Standish.”

“ Did anything more happen last night ? ” asked Ronald.

“ Nothing of any importance. We rang up George in London, but found that he had caught the eight o’clock train from King’s Cross to York. His man didn’t know where he was staying there, but he’d gone up on business.”

“ And nothing more this morning ? ”

“ Not before I left. You will help Charles, won’t you, Mr. Standish ? You see, it’s not enough, as he said to me, for them not to be able to prove that he did it. He’s got to be able to prove that he didn’t.”

“ That is so,” agreed Ronald gravely. “ Otherwise on the facts as you’ve told them to me suspicion will stick to him for the rest of his life.”

“ But you don’t think—you *can’t* think—he did it,” she cried indignantly.

“ Does it very much matter what I think, or don’t think ? ” said Ronald. “ Though if it’s any comfort to you, I don’t think he did it. But what we’ve got to do—if we can—is to

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prove that to the satisfaction of other people. And that may not be very easy. Have you any ideas yourself ? ”

“ I believe it was a poacher,” she said. “ Or someone Uncle Peter had had before him on the Bench, and sentenced. But probably a poacher, because he’d be more likely to have a sporting gun. But you’ll come down, Mr. Standish, won’t you ? You will help him ? ”

“ I will. I’ll come down this afternoon. And then we’ll see what we can do.”

“ Well, Bob,” he said after he had shown our visitor out, “ what do you make of it ? ”

“ Much the same as you,” I answered. “ I can hardly believe that any sane man would have done such an insane action just after two violent quarrels.”

“ He gets the title. He gets Horsham Grange and a lot more money. It is arguable both ways, you know. Supposing Charles Denne said to himself exactly what you’ve just said. Supposing he reasoned it out that the thing would appear so insensate, so obvious, that that in itself would be a proof that he couldn’t have done it.”

“ Yes,” I said doubtfully. “ I suppose it is possible.”

“ It’s certainly possible. Whether it’s likely is a different matter. And in that case the episode of the handkerchief loses any significance. He dropped it accidentally and it blew away. But if it isn’t the case then the matter of the handkerchief becomes of supreme importance.”

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“ In what way ? ”

“ Because it narrows our field down to someone who wished not only to murder the old man, but also to foist the crime on to Charles Denne. And that rather precludes a stray poacher, who is not as a rule a man of high mentality. Would the average vagrant go to the length of planting a handkerchief ? How would he get the handkerchief in the first place ? Still, there may be some further developments when we get down there.”

His prophecy was destined to be fulfilled : further developments there were indeed. Charles Denne had already been arrested and charged with the murder of his uncle. And I must confess that the new fact that had come to light and had caused the issue of the warrant seemed pretty damning to me. For it proved conclusively, if it was true, that Charles Denne had lied over at least one point.

The evidence had been volunteered by a man called John Dillon, a very respectable farmer in a small way, who was a pillar of the local church and a man whose integrity was above suspicion. He stated that at about nine-forty the previous evening Charles Denne had passed him in the road carrying a gun under his arm, and had spoken to him. He had been standing just outside his own gate at the time, and the remark which Denne had made to him was, “ Good evening, Dillon. Mr George and I will be having another whack at your rabbits soon.”

Pressed as to how he knew it was a gun, he



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stated that he had seen the faint glint of the barrel. Moreover, it was being carried as a man carries a gun, and not a walking-stick. What type of gun it was he could not say, but nothing would make him budge from his statement that it was some form of weapon.

Now the most superficial glance at the topography of the place revealed that if Sir Peter had been killed round about nine-thirty, the murderer, should he have been walking towards Charles Denne's house, would pass Dillon's door ten minutes later. And this, coupled with the fact that Charles and his cousin *had* shot rabbits over Dillon's ground a few weeks previously, seemed to clinch things conclusively. It was true that Dillon had not actually recognised Charles in the darkness, but if it was not he who else could it have been? Who but he would have alluded to George Denne as Mr. George? And if it was not George Denne who had been alluded to, who was it? He was the only George who had shot over Dillon's ground.

Strangely enough Ronald did not seem as worried as I expected.

"Proceeding on the assumption, Bob, as we are, that Charles Denne is innocent, this is merely another attempt to foist the crime on to him. It has of course been obvious to you all along that the murderer must be conversant with Denne's habits. The significance of Wednesday night being selected cannot be overlooked: the one night when the servants are out and their master can't rely on them for an alibi. So is it surprising that he should also

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have known that Charles Denne and his cousin George shot over Dillon's land? And made use of the knowledge?"

Which was perfectly sound, but it left the solution of the main problem as far off as ever. Who was the man who had impersonated Charles Denne? The inspector, conscious that his case was by no means foolproof, had not stopped his investigations. But nothing further came to light. The staff at Horsham Grange could, one and all, account satisfactorily for their movements between nine and ten on the fatal night. Two men who lived in the neighbourhood and who had recently been released from prison after serving a sentence for poaching, were equally convincing. And there seemed to be no one else who could possibly desire Sir Peter's death.

He even went so far as to check up George Denne's movements, once again to come up against a brick wall. The evidence was absolutely conclusive that at 11.45 p.m. on Wednesday he had arrived in York on the eight o'clock express from King's Cross. The ticket collector who knew him, since he often did the journey, was positive of the day because of a remark he had made when handing up his ticket. It had concerned a horse which had won that afternoon, and so had impressed itself on his memory. Further, there was the evidence of the hotel where he had stayed, and of the business deal he had put through on the Thursday morning.

In fact, every single being that Drury knew of who could possibly be interested in Sir Peter's

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death had a perfect alibi. And so the only logical conclusion was that it was someone he did not know of or that it was Charles Denne. The mere thought of Muriel Padston being the culprit—though it was undeniably true that there was no one who could vouch for her movements—he dismissed as too horrible to contemplate.

After the first stiffness had worn off Drury had got along well with Ronald. He realised they were both working in a common cause—the finding of the criminal. And no one would have been better pleased than he were Ronald able to prove it was not Charles Denne.

“A more open-handed gentleman, sir,” he remarked on the day after our arrival, “I’ve never met. Everybody knows that he and his uncle didn’t get on, but that he should have been guilty of such a dastardly crime is beyond me. And yet, if it wasn’t him, who the devil was it? If it was someone from Sir Peter’s past life—someone we haven’t even heard of—how comes it that he was so glib with his local knowledge? If he’d been knocking around the place here he’d have been noticed; a stranger in a village like this is everybody’s business in ten minutes.”

But there had been no one. Muriel Padston could throw no light on it, nor could Charles Denne. And nor could George, living as he did in London. He had arrived in time for dinner on the Thursday, having motored post-haste from Town.

“I was busy this morning in York,” he said,

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"and never read the paper. Actually, the first thing I heard of it was when I reached London and a man sympathised with me in the club. What a ghastly thing! Uncle Peter of all men."

The funeral was attended by the whole county, a striking tribute to the dead baronet's popularity. And a few days later Charles Denne was formally committed for trial on the charge of murdering his uncle. No further evidence had come to hand, and opinion as to his guilt was divided. A few loyal friends never wavered in their belief in his innocence. But the majority were floored by the same difficulty that had defeated Inspector Drury. If it was not Charles Denne, who was it?

The date of the trial approached, and Ronald's irritability increased. We had long left Horsham Grange, as there was nothing further to be done there. But as the days passed his conviction of Charles Denne's innocence strengthened, till it became almost unreasoning. And he felt it was his fault that the truth had not been arrived at.

"A verdict of what is tantamount to Non Proven is no good, Bob," he said again and again. "We've got to *prove* him innocent, otherwise he's finished for the rest of his life. And every instinct I possess rebels against the idea that he did it."

And then one evening, about ten days before the trial was due to commence, he walked into my sitting-room and solemnly bent over a chair.

"Do you mind giving me a dozen of the best,

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Bob, as hard as you can lay in, and then sending for a mental specialist."

A sudden wave of excitement came over me.

"You don't mean to say you've solved it?"

I cried.

He lit a cigarette.

"The Lord has created fools, damned fools, and me," he remarked. "Though, 'pon my sam, you're all in the same boat. I believe I once said to you, Bob, that it is the obvious thing one is so liable to overlook. I even gave you the homely illustration of the two women, one of whom entered a room with a baby in her arms, and the other with a sucking pig. I asked you which you would be most likely to remember, and with unerring accuracy you got the answer right. It's been the same in this case: we've all been concentrating on the lady with the sucking pig."

"For Heaven's sake stop drivelling," I cried in exasperation. "Who did kill Sir Peter?"

"All in good time," he said. "But I promise you shall know very shortly. And since I have been driven into outer darkness by plumbers and people, I have taken the liberty of asking a few people round here. I trust they will keep to their time-table as it is rather important."

The bell rang and Inspector Drury came in.

"Good evening, Inspector," said Ronald. "I have asked you round so that you can hear a very important development in the case."

"So I gathered," answered the mystified officer. "What is it?"

"And here," continued Ronald, "is Mr.

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Jacobson, the proprietor of the Bull garage in Grantham."

A respectably dressed middle-aged man had entered, and stood looking about in some surprise.

"Have you brought the book, Mr. Jacobson? And the other thing?"

"Here it is, sir," he said, handing a ragged and rather dirty small book over to Ronald. "I've got the other here, too."

"The most valuable witness in the case, Drury," remarked Ronald, holding it up. "And now, if you don't mind, would you both retire into Mr. Leyton's bedroom, where you can hear without being seen."

The bell rang again, and as the two men disappeared, Sir Kenneth Paine, K.C., the brilliant counsel briefed for the defence, came in.

"Evening, Standish," he said. "I got your message at the club. What's it all about?"

"Some fresh facts have come to light, Sir Kenneth," answered Ronald, "which I think are going to make your task a very easy one. But before I give them to you, we'll wait for Mr. George Denne, who will naturally be interested in them, too. And here he is."

"Good evening, Standish," cried Denne, entering. "Evening, Sir Kenneth. What's this I hear: you've found out something that will help poor old Charles? Excellent."

"I'm sure this information is going to be of the very greatest assistance," said Ronald. "So I thought we'd better have a conference at once with Sir Kenneth."

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"Quite right; quite right," remarked the K.C., lighting a cigar. "For I'm bound to say, gentlemen, that though I don't think they'll hang him it's going to be a near thing on facts as they stand at present. That particular defence that no man could be such a crass idiot as to commit such a crime in such a way is weak. And if I rely on the line that someone was deliberately impersonating him, I'd prefer if I could," he concluded with a short laugh, "to produce the someone."

"Precisely, Sir Kenneth," agreed Ronald. "And since I felt that way myself, I decided to produce that someone for you. There he is."

His outstretched finger pointed at George Denne, who with an ashen face was swallowing repeatedly.

"You're mad," he stuttered at length. "Mad. I was in the train going to York. Is this some damn fool trick?"

His self-control was coming back, and he rose to his feet.

"I don't know much about the law, Mr. Standish, but I believe there's one on libel. How dare you make such an accusation against me?"

Ronald Standish was balancing the little book in his hand.

"Do you know what this is, Denne?"

"I don't; and I don't care."

"This is the book in which Mr. Jacobson, who owns the Bull garage at Grantham . . ."

With an oath, George Denne hurled himself on Ronald, only to be met with a straight left

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on the jaw, that knocked him half senseless to the floor.

"Here's your man, Inspector," called out Ronald. "He murdered Sir Peter on the night of Wednesday the twenty-first of last month by shooting him through the head from close range with a sporting gun."

With venomous eyes, Denne glared at Ronald from the carpet.

"It's a lie," he said thickly.

"It looks it," remarked Sir Kenneth dryly. "Your face at the moment is enough to send you to the gallows, without further evidence. But having made the accusation, Standish, it's up to you to substantiate it. I understood, I must confess, that he was in the eight o'clock express from King's Cross to York."

"That's what we all understood, Sir Kenneth," said Ronald quietly. "And beyond any question of doubt he arrived in that train at York where he handed up the first half of a return ticket from London to York. Naturally, under such éircumstances, the assumption would be that the passenger boarded the train in London, thereby giving a cast-iron alibi for a murder committed between nine and ten. And what we all overlooked, every man jack of us, was the fact that the train stopped at Grantham."

The inspector gave a whistle of disgust.

"It seems incredible, I know," continued Ronald, "that such a blatant and obvious point should have been missed. I suppose it was because it *was* so obvious. But the instant it penetrated my fat skull the whole case changed.



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What was a cast-iron alibi became no alibi at all. The train arrived at Grantham at ten, which left ample time for you, Denne, to murder your uncle and catch it there."

"Have I no redress against these monstrous allegations, Sir Kenneth?" snarled Denne.

"I take it you can prove this, Standish?" said Sir Kenneth gravely. "What you are saying is pretty serious."

"Is the number of your car VCT480, Denne?"

"It is."

"Where was your car on the night of Wednesday the twenty-first?"

"In London to the best of my belief."

Ronald turned over the pages of the little book.

"Would it interest you to know that VCT480 was taken in by the Bull garage at Grantham at nine-forty-three that night?"

A muscle in Denne's neck was twitching.

"Very much," he said. "If what you say is the case somebody must have been joy-riding, I suppose."

"Really," remarked Ronald. "By what train did you leave York on Thursday, the twenty-second?"

"Go to hell," shouted Denne. "What the devil has that got to do with you?"

"If I were you, Mr. Denne," said Sir Kenneth quietly, "I would answer the question. If you don't it is apt to give a false impression."

"By the noon train," said Denne sullenly.

"Which arrives at Grantham at one-forty," continued Ronald, again consulting his book. "Would it interest you to know that VCT480

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was removed from the Bull garage at one-forty-seven that day, by the same man who had put the car in the preceding night and who stated he had just come from York? "

Denne scowled but said nothing.

"The reason I can say that with confidence," went on Ronald, "is that the man rather impressed Mr. Jacobson by his almost morbid interest in Sir Peter Denne's death which he had read about coming down in the train. And so he remembered the whole conversation and the man."

"Well, it couldn't have been me," snarled Denne. "I knew nothing about my uncle's death till I reached London."

"I am quite aware that that is what you have always maintained," said Ronald gravely. "Which is not quite the same thing, is it? Because, Mr. Denne, a most unfortunate thing took place. As VCT480 drove out of the garage Mr. Jacobson saw, lying on the ground, an international driving licence, which had obviously fallen out of one of the pockets. He ran after the car but he couldn't stop it, and so he kept the licence expecting the owner would write for it."

Denne's face was ghastly to look at; his forehead was covered with sweat.

"That doesn't prove that I was driving the car," he muttered.

"Mr. Jacobson," called out Ronald. "Come in, will you? Is that the man?" he asked, as the garage proprietor came in with the blue licence book in his hand.

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"It is, sir," he answered without a moment's hesitation.

"It's a lie," screamed Denne. "He's making a mistake. How could he remember a man after all this time?"

"Surely you forget, Mr. Denne," said Ronald, "one essential feature of an international licence. Your photograph is pasted in it."

For a tense five seconds there was dead silence; then George Denne crumpled up and collapsed.

"I did it, God damn you," he croaked. "I did it."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Smart of you, Standish," said Sir Kenneth a few moments later when Denne had been removed by the inspector. "I still don't quite see the whole thing."

"From the word 'go,' Sir Kenneth, it was obvious that Mr. George Denne was what might be described as an interested party. Of all the people we *knew* about he stood to benefit most. With Sir Peter dead and Charles hanged, he became the baronet. But since, in my fatuous stupidity, I thought he *couldn't* have done it owing to his being in the train, I dismissed him from my mind. When I realised that he *could* I set to work to review the whole thing from that angle. And at once everything began to fit in.

"He knew of the bad feeling between his cousin and uncle. He could easily have obtained one of Charles's handkerchiefs when staying with him. He knew that Charles's

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servants were always out on Wednesday night. He, more than anyone else, would have been likely to make that remark to Dillon ; and his voice is not unlike his cousin's.

" So far so good, but we weren't over even the first hurdle, yet. If he'd done it, how had he done it ? There were two methods : by train entirely, or by train and car. He buys a first return to York some time on Wednesday ; at another pigeon-hole he gets a third to Grantham. Then he goes to Grantham by an earlier train ; murders Sir Peter, and joins up on the eight o'clock express for York. Now I said by train entirely ; I must amend that a little. Horsham Grange is ten miles from Grantham ; therefore, he would have had to hire a car. Would he have dared risk it ? In addition to that he would have been carrying a gun. Further, he would have had to tell the driver to stop somewhere while he killed the old man. No ; that method was impossible.

" So I come to number two : train and car. He still buys his first return from London to York ; then he motors up to Horsham Grange, and leaves his car hidden in some safe spot. Don't forget he knows the country. Then having shot Sir Peter, he goes on to Grantham and buys a return ticket to York. Then he catches the express ; arrives in York, and goes out of his way to draw attention to himself with the ticket collector, whilst handing him the London ticket. Next day, having concluded his business, he catches the noon express and, utilising the return half of the ticket he bought

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at Grantham, he gets off there and picks up his car. Then he disappears into the blue until it is time for him to appear at Horsham Grange, having ostensibly motored up from London. That method was possible, but—and it was the hell of a but—could it be proved ?

“ It was obvious he would have to drive his own car up ; no one else must know anything about it. Equally it was obvious he must garage it somewhere in Grantham. Could I find the garage, and if I did would there be any record ? For if I couldn’t check in on that point we were no better off. My theory was purely academic, and would be torn to shreds by a clever lawyer.

“ As luck would have it, Mr. George Denne had garaged at Jacobson’s, near the station. And they keep counterfoil tallies of every car that comes in. There was the entry as large as life ; my theory had ceased to be academic.”

“ For all that,” said Sir Kenneth, rising, “ it’s fortunate for us he dropped that international driving pass. Otherwise identification after such a long gap of time would have been a ticklish affair. Admittedly, if it hadn’t been Denne driving the coincidence would have been remarkable ; but once again it would have been the old question of the difference between knowing and proving.”

“ Or confessing,” remarked Ronald thoughtfully, after Sir Kenneth had gone and we were alone. “ I must say Jacobson played up splendidly.”

“ What on earth do you mean ? ” I cried.

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"Knowing and proving; Sir Kenneth was right. When I saw those entries in the book I knew. The coincidence of a joy rider taking Denne's car to Grantham on that particular night was simply too fantastic to contemplate. George Denne was the murderer."

"But what do you mean about Jacobson playing up?"

"How often do you look in the pockets of the doors of your car, Bob?" he asked.

"Very rarely. Why?"

"Nor does anyone, and that's why I chanced it. You see, that international driving licence never fell out in the garage at all. I stole it from Denne's car three days ago."



## 10

### THE TENTH EARL

LADY RANELAGH was an extremely lovely woman. Almost one might say girl, for she was only twenty-five. And as it so happened that I had seen a good deal of Kitty Barberton, as she then was, before her marriage to the Earl, it was with real pleasure that I ran into her at the Savoy one morning just before lunch.

"How goes it?" I cried. "It must be a year at least since we last met. And now that I look at you, Kitty, you seem a bit fine drawn. Anything the matter?"

"Order a cocktail, Bob," she said. "My party won't be here for ten minutes yet."

We sat down and I beckoned to a waiter.

"I believe it's Providence that I butted into you," she went on. "Is that nice friend of yours, Ronald Standish, still in London?"

"He was last night," I said. "Why?"

She hesitated for a moment, and I noticed her hand was trembling a little.

"Does he still go in for detective work?"

"If a case interests him, and he's asked to take it up, he does," I told her.



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She waited while the man put the drinks on the table: then she leant forward.

"Bob," she said in a low voice, "I'm terribly uneasy. Things are going on down at the Towers that I don't understand."

"What sort of things?" I asked.

"There's no time to tell you now," she answered. "I see that awful cow of a Melshot woman arriving already. Are you lunching here?"

"In the grill-room," I said.

"Do you think it would be possible for us to go round and see Mr. Standish this afternoon?"

"Perfectly. He's lunching at his club, I know. I'll get through to him on the telephone."

"Send a note in to me by a waiter to say if it's all right," she said. "Any time after three will do me. And it's rather urgent, Bob."

"I'm sure I can fix it, my dear," I told her. "I'll ring him up now."

I got on to Ronald at once and fixed three-thirty: then having sent her a message to that effect I ordered another cocktail and sat down to wait for the man I was lunching with. What, I wondered, could be the trouble at the Towers?

Henry, tenth Earl of Ranelagh, had been married to Kitty Barberton for eighteen months. About twelve years older than her it had seemed and, so far as I know, had proved an ideal marriage in every way. He was a charming man, good looking, cultivated and a fine sportsman. In addition to all that, unlike many less fortunate members of the aristocracy, he

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had no worries over finance and was able to keep up the Towers in the semi-regal magnificence of his ancestors. It was a huge house, and only an extremely wealthy man could possibly have maintained it. The gardens were famed all over England: the avenue of copper beeches was historic. In fact the house was historic. Charles the First had made it his headquarters for a considerable time during the Civil War: all down the centuries royalty had honoured it with periodical visits. In short it was one of England's show places, and the last spot where one would anticipate trouble of any sort.

The present Earl had succeeded to the title three years before he married Kitty. He had two younger brothers one of whom was in the Navy, the other out in Canada. His sister Muriel, who was older than him, was strangely enough unmarried. She had all the family good looks, and the reason, one gathered, of her still being single was a war-time tragedy. Before his marriage she had lived with the Earl: now she occupied the dower house some two miles away.

Such, then, was the *ménage* into which Kitty Barberton had married, and all the way through lunch my mind kept reverting to what she had said. What could it be that was making her uneasy? What could be going on that she did not understand? But since every possibility that occurred to me was more absurd than the one before, I gave it up and possessed my soul in patience till we arrived at Ronald's rooms at half past three.

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"Would you like me to leave you two alone?" I said when they had shaken hands.

"Not a bit, Bob," she cried. "I don't in the least mind you knowing all about it. Not that there's really very much to know, and I think that because of that, because it is so indeterminate that it's got on my nerves. You've met my husband, Mr. Standish, haven't you?"

"I have," said Ronald. "I can't say that I know him at all well: Bob knows him much better than I do. But we've shot together once or twice."

"It's about him that I'm worried," she began. "However, I'd better go right away back to when the thing first started. And it's only comparatively recently that little episodes which occurred at the beginning have fitted into their proper place: at the time I thought nothing of them.

"About a fortnight after we came back from our honeymoon I was in the library one morning looking for a book. And it so happened that I was standing in an alcove out of sight of the door, which suddenly opened and Henry came in with someone else.

"'Come in here, Doctor,' I heard him say, and then the door shut.

"'It's out of the question, Henry,' said the other man, and I recognised the voice of Doctor Frobisher. He is the local doctor, who has attended the family for years and who is regarded as an old friend rather than as a doctor.

"'But, my God! how much longer is it

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going on?' cried my husband, and then I stepped out into the room.

"They both swung round, and for a moment or two Henry looked annoyed.

"'Hallo! dear,' he said, 'where have you sprung from?'

"'I was looking for a book,' I answered, wondering whether I should say anything about the remark I had just heard.

"'I hope you had a pleasant time in France, Lady Ranelagh,' said Doctor Frobisher, at the same time opening the door for me.

"I made some perfunctory reply, and left them. And since it so happened that Henry had to go up to London that afternoon for a few days, I had no opportunity of asking him about it at once. Then when he came back I put it off, until finally it was too late, and the whole episode faded from my memory."

"That would be about fifteen months ago, Lady Ranelagh," said Ronald.

"That's right," she answered. "Well, as time passed by, it began to strike me that Doctor Frobisher came to the house rather more frequently than one would expect. He was continually coming either to dinner or lunch, and on two or three occasions I saw his car in the drive in the middle of the morning. So one day I mentioned it casually to Henry, who turned it off with a laugh.

"'My dear girl,' he said, 'the old chap loves my port. And seeing that he brought the whole lot of us into the world he can have as much of it as he wants, bless his heart.'

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"But it seemed to me, Mr. Standish, that he looked at me a little queerly, and I wondered if his answer was quite the truth. Certainly there was no one ill in the house, and so there was no reason for a professional visit: at the same time I had an intuitive feeling that there was something that was being kept back from me. And though I can truthfully say that I'm not a particularly curious person, it piqued me a little. With the result that I kept my eyes open more than I should have done normally. But I found out nothing until one day about a fortnight ago.

"Happening to look through the window I saw the doctor's car outside. Now it was eleven o'clock in the morning, and the old man had dined with us the night before. And it struck me that, port or no port, this was a little excessive. So I went out into the hall just in time to see Henry and him disappearing into the library. And as they closed the door I heard my sister-in-law's voice.

" 'Well, Doctor Frobisher, what do you think?'

"For a moment or two I hesitated: then I'm ashamed to say that I deliberately tiptoed across the hall and listened outside the door. But they were talking in low voices, and I could hear nothing until I suddenly caught one sentence of my husband's.

" 'She must know nothing; under no circumstances must she ever find out.'

"And at that moment I looked round to find Weston, the butler, watching me from the door

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that leads to the servant's quarters. There was nothing to be done about it, and I don't think I've ever felt more embarrassed. To be caught red-handed eavesdropping by a servant is not funny, especially when that servant was Weston who has been with the family since the dawn of history. So I did the only possible thing: I opened the door and went in.

"The conversation ceased abruptly.

" 'Hullo! Kitty dear,' said Muriel. 'I was just coming to see you. I'm stopping to lunch if I may.'

" 'Delighted,' I replied. 'Am I interrupting a family pow-wow?'

" 'Of course not, darling,' cried Henry. 'This old rascal has come for a hair of the dog that bit him last night.'

" 'Playing the deuce with my gout, too,' laughed Doctor Frobisher. 'But if your husband insists on keeping such an infernally good cellar, Lady Ranelagh, what on earth is a poor country practitioner to do?'

"I laughed too, and left them. But now, of course, all my suspicions were confirmed. Who could the 'she' be who must never find out except myself? Something *was* being kept back from me, and I determined to tackle Henry direct. The opportunity came that very night.

" 'Just before I came into the library this morning, Henry,' I said, 'I overheard a remark you made. You said, "She must know nothing: under no circumstances must she ever find out." You were alluding to me?'

" 'My dear Kitty,' he answered, 'that shows

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how dangerous it is to listen to a conversation and only hear one remark.'

" 'I wasn't listening,' I said, putting down the indignation pedal.

" 'Weren't you?' he answered quietly, and in a flash I knew that Weston had told him. 'Anyway the "she" I referred to was not you. but somebody quite different. If you must know, Charles'—that's his youngest brother—'has been making a fool of himself over a woman, and we're trying to get him out of it.' "

She paused and lit a cigarette thoughtfully.

" Mr. Standish, that was a lie. I knew it, and Henry knew that I knew it. I didn't say anything, of course, but it hurt—hurt considerably. As his wife surely I had as much right to be taken into his confidence as Muriel or Doctor Frobisher. And Weston, too. How dared he go to Henry and tell him he'd seen me listening outside the door unless he was in it, too. It would be as much as any butler's place is worth to say such a thing under normal circumstances.

" As I said, that was about a fortnight ago, and since then Henry has been most odd. I can tell he's worried to death about something, and he seems to get worse and worse every day. And then two mornings ago it came to a head. I don't think you know the house, Mr. Standish, but Bob does. It is an enormous barrack of a place: there are old box-rooms and lumber-rooms that even I haven't been in to. And it so happened that on the day in question I was walking along a passage in the east wing which

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I'd never been along before. As a matter of fact parts of that wing are never used; they are supposed to be damp or something.

"Suddenly walking towards me I saw Henry, and as he came up I made some commonplace remark about the passage wanting dusting. Then I looked at his face and gasped. It was quite white, and his voice when he spoke was shaking—shaking with rage.

" 'What are you doing here?' he said.

" 'I really don't know,' I answered. 'Is there any reason why I shouldn't be here?'

" 'As you can imagine, I was a bit fed up: there didn't seem to me to be anything peculiar in the mistress of a house going round it. And I suppose the same idea occurred to Henry, for he pulled himself together and gave a sort of sickly smile.

" 'Sorry, darling,' he said. 'No reason at all, of course. I'm a bit nervy to-day; didn't sleep very well last night.'

" 'What is this mystery, Henry?' I burst out. 'There's no good pretending there isn't one, because it sticks out a yard. Muriel knows about it, and Doctor Frobisher and Weston. Why can't I be told?'

" 'He took me by the arm, and led me back to the main part of the house.

" 'You're imagining things, my dear,' he said. 'There's no mystery at all. I was a little surprised at finding you in this unused part of the house—that's all.'

" 'Then what were you doing there?' I demanded.



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“ ‘Just having a look round,’ he answered. ‘There’s a bit of dry rot starting, and I don’t want it to go too far.’

“ ‘The dry rot is what you’re talking,’ I said angrily. ‘Do you imagine I’m a fool, Henry, or a baby? Once and for all, will you tell me what this mystery is?’

“ ‘Once and for all I tell you there is no mystery,’ was his reply. ‘You’re imagining the whole thing.’

“And that’s how it stands at the moment, Mr. Standish, and it is upsetting me terribly. I’m frightfully fond of him, but this beastly barrier between us is ruining everything. And I wondered if you could help me.”

Ronald raised his eyebrows.

“It’s rather a tough proposition, Lady Ranelagh,” he said. “To help you I should have to come to the Towers, and if I did so it would be the most unwarrantable impertinence on my part if I started prying into your husband’s private affairs. Besides, what possible excuse have I got for going there at all? To be quite frank I haven’t the pleasure of knowing either of you at all well. . . .”

“I’ve thought of that, Mr. Standish,” she interrupted. “And that’s where Bob comes in, for he knows Henry very well and me too. This morning two guns failed us. What about you and Bob coming in their place?”

“I can assure you,” said Ronald with a smile, “that an invitation to shoot your coverts would *not* be thrown in the paper basket. But what will your husband say? He’s almost

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certain to have already invited two other guns to fill the vacancies."

"He hasn't. He asked me to get hold of Tony Ditchling at lunch to-day, but I didn't. Anyway he's a foul shot. I'm going to tell him that I asked Bob, and that he suggested you."

She rose.

"So that's settled. I'll write you a line confirming the invitation to-night. And it is sweet of you to have listened so patiently."

"A remarkable woman, Bob," said Ronald, as he came back from seeing her off, "and three days' shooting is not to be sneezed at. But if the dear thing expects me to go nosing round the house I fear she's going to be disappointed. It would be an unpardonable thing to do."

"I wonder what the deuce it can be," I remarked.

"He's always been a healthy bloke, hasn't he?" said Ronald.

"So far as I know, perfectly."

"Because it did occur to me to start with that he might have some illness which had to be kept from her. That would account for the doctor's consumption of port, and the old family butler being in it."

"But hardly for the agitation in the passage," I remarked.

"No; not for that. Well, let's hope at any rate that we hit 'em in the beak."

\* \* \* \* \*

I had not seen Henry Ranelagh since his marriage, and I confess that I was shocked at

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his appearance. He looked a sick man, so much so that I began to wonder whether Ronald's idea had not been right, and that he was suffering from some disease himself. At times he was his old self, but it always seemed to me that it was forced.

As usual the shooting was wonderful, but only on one day did our host come out with us, which was a most significant thing in itself for he was a magnificent shot. And somewhat naturally his mood communicated itself to the party, so that it was with a feeling of relief that one realised it was drawing to a close.

It was on the last night but one of our visit that Ronald came into my room for a final cigarette. There was thunder about; the atmosphere was sultry and oppressive. Heavy clouds drifted sluggishly across the sky, and through them the moon made a fitful appearance. He was in his dressing-gown, and drawing up two chairs we sat down by the open window.

"I had a long talk with Lady Ranelagh after dinner," he said. "She's worried to death, poor soul, and I'm only sorry I can't help her. I had to tell her that I was afraid I'd earned a shoot under false pretences."

"His nerves are certainly all to hell," I remarked. "I've been wondering if you weren't right and that he's ill."

He shook his head, and looked at me curiously.

"Did you hear anything last night, Bob? Round about three o'clock."

"No; I didn't. I was tired, and never batted an eyelid till I was called. What was it?"

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"I can't say. But I had one of those nights when one can't get to sleep. The house was deathly still; nothing was stirring outside, when suddenly from a long way off there came a harsh call—rather like the call of a bittern. But there are no bitterns in this neighbourhood. It was not repeated, and I was just beginning to doze off when I heard a strange sort of slithering noise going past my door. It was so peculiar that I got up and looked out. And in the faint light—the moon was just setting—I saw what looked like a shadow move. It was there one moment and gone the next. And in the distance a board creaked. For a moment or two I hesitated: should I follow? And then I heard steps—ordinary human footsteps. So I closed my door, save for a tiny crack, and waited. Two men came past, walking along the passage, and going in the direction in which the shadow had vanished. One was Ranelagh; the other was the butler Weston."

"Good Lord!" I cried. "Did you say anything to Kitty about it?"

"No; I thought it better not. There's no good frightening her with vague stories."

"What do you make of it, Ronald?"

"Just this. That were it possible in my position as a guest to do such an outrageous thing, I would very much like to have an hour alone in the wing where Lady Ranelagh unexpectedly met her husband that day."

He pitched his cigarette out of the window and got up.

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"But since it isn't possible . . . My God ! Listen. The same noise."

From outside there came an eerie, wailing cry, harsh and discordant. It rose and fell, then ceased abruptly.

"Switch out your light, Bob," said Ronald quietly.

I did so, and side by side we stood at the window peering out into the darkness. And at that moment a vivid flash of lightning split the sky. It was like the instantaneous exposure of a camera. For in that fraction of a second the picture was printed on our brains. In the middle of the garden two men were bending over something dark that lay on the ground between them ; one was Henry Ranelagh, the other was Weston the butler.

Came the crash of thunder, and we waited tensely for the next flash. At last we got it, more vivid even than the one before. The garden was empty ; of Henry and his butler and the thing that had lain between them there was no sign.

"What was it ? " I muttered.

"I don't know, Bob," said Ronald gravely. "But whatever it was it's none of our business. I'm going to bed."

And so did I—but not to sleep. Try as I would it eluded me. I could not keep my mind off what we had seen. Was it imagination ? Had there been something out there, or was it a trick of the light ? But if that was the case what had taken Henry and his butler to the garden at that time of night ? And still puzzling, at last I dropped off.

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It was broad daylight when I woke, to find Ronald fully dressed standing by my bed.

"I've been taking a spot of exercise, Bob," he said. "And where do you think my foot-steps led me?"

"To the garden?" I hazarded.

"You've said it. I wanted to see if the ground would tell us anything."

"Has it?"

"Yes. There were three distinct sets of footprints on one bed. One was the Earl's; one was Weston's."

"And the third?"

"Were the footprints of a child," he answered.

"A child!" I echoed. "Is that then the mystery?"

"You know as much as I do, Bob. There is certainly no question of there being any child in the party."

"But that awful noise?" I said, staring at him.

"Just so. That noise." He shook his head gravely. "I'm afraid we're treading on rather dangerous ground, old boy."

"So you think that somewhere concealed in this house there is a child, and that that is the secret which is being kept from Kitty?"

"I can't see what else there is to make of it."

"But why on earth hasn't it been seen before? It is obviously free to walk about."

"Ask me another," he said.

"Can it have only just arrived?"

"Possibly. It may be that the conversation Lady Ranelagh interrupted a fortnight ago was

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when they were making the original plans to bring it here. Be that as it may, I can't help thinking that it is most unfair on her to keep her in ignorance. If she does run into it the shock will be infinitely greater."

"Where can they have hidden it, I wonder?"

"My dear Bob, in an old house of this vast size there is almost certain to be a secret room. That's why I said I'd like an hour in that wing alone."

"What are you going to do about it?" I said.

"Nothing," he answered promptly. "As I said to you last night, Bob, it is no business of ours. To interfere in such a matter would be unpardonable."

"I suppose it would. And yet I wish we could put Kitty wise. She's worried to death."

"If you get a chance find out from her if she heard that noise last night," said Ronald as he left the room.

As it happened I did get a chance, just before we were starting out.

"Of course I heard it, Bob," she said. "And I tell you I can't go on like this. Henry was out of his room practically the whole of last night. It's getting on my nerves. Doesn't Mr. Standish see that something is wrong?"

"Naturally he sees it," I said guardedly. "But he's in a very difficult position, Kitty."

"But has he said nothing to you?"

"He's a very uncommunicative bloke," I temporised, but she shook her head.

"I'm sure he knows something," she said. "Or at any rate suspects."

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"Isn't Henry coming out to-day?" I asked.

"No; he isn't. And don't try and change the conversation, Bob. Listen to me. If Henry is out of his room again to-night I'm going to follow him. Will you and Mr. Standish come with me?"

"My dear," I said, "it's really devilish awkward, you know. Henry is our host, and to spy on him is a gross abuse of his hospitality."

"And I'm your hostess," she answered. "Bob, this can't go on. I must know the truth. If you won't come with me I shall go alone."

"I'll talk to Ronald about it, Kitty," I promised. "But you do see, don't you, what a very embarrassing position we are in?"

Strangely enough, when I mentioned it to him during the course of the morning he viewed it rather differently.

"I think that if we go with her, Bob—at her request, so to speak—it puts the matter on another footing. It's totally different to our prying round on our own."

"Then I'll tell her that we'll both be in my room," I said.

And so for the second time did we settle down to a vigil by the open window. We sat in the darkness, and gradually the house grew silent. And then just as my head was beginning to nod there came a gentle knock on the door. Kitty was standing outside.

"Henry's dressed," she whispered. "He's gone out into the park."

"Come along," said Ronald briefly. "Though we may have a job to follow him."



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We crept down the stairs, and through a side-door.

"Have you the slightest idea where he's gone?" asked Ronald, and even as he spoke a light shone out suddenly through the trees. It was two or three hundred yards away, and Kitty gave a little gasp.

"It's the mausoleum," she said. "They're all buried there—the Ranelaghs."

"Is that so." Ronald's voice was grave. "Let's go there, but don't make a noise."

Our feet made no sound on the springy turf, but for the last thirty yards we had to cross a gravelled drive that led to the door. And it was when we were half-way across it that Kitty stumbled, and only just saved herself from falling. But the noise was plainly audible in the still night, and the light inside the mausoleum was instantly extinguished. A few seconds later the door opened and Henry Ranelagh's voice came out of the darkness.

"Who's there?" he said.

"It's me, Henry," answered his wife quietly.

"What are you doing here at this time of night?" he cried. "Go back to bed at once."

He flashed on his torch, and discovered the three of us.

"So, gentlemen," and his voice was icy, "this is the way you behave when you are guests in a house."

"They came with me at my express wish, Henry," said his wife. "They didn't want to—either of them."

"I don't think you quite realise, Lord

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Ranelagh," said Ronald gravely, "how worried your wife has been. And now that things have come to this pass, if you take my earnest advice you'll cease making a mystery of things and take her into your confidence. Neither Bob nor I wish to hear; at the same time . . ."

He stepped forward and whispered something to the Earl, who gave a violent start.

"How do you know that?" he cried.

"Am I right?" said Ronald.

"Up to a point. But you don't know all"

"Wouldn't it be better if we did? Or at any rate tell Lady Ranelagh. There will be permanent mistrust between you till you do."

For a long minute he stood motionless; then abruptly he turned round and entered the mausoleum.

"Come inside," he said curtly. "Shut the door, please; I'll turn on the light."

He did so, and a strange sight met our eyes. On a raised dais in the centre of the room was a small coffin; beside it stood Doctor Frobisher and the butler Weston. And inside it lay the body of a boy.

"Perhaps it is better so, Henry," said the doctor gravely. "I am sure we can trust these two gentlemen not to speak."

"Most certainly," answered Ronald equally gravely. "At the same time it is obvious, I think, that some explanation is necessary. Who is this boy?"

"My brother," said the Earl, and his wife gave a little gasp.

"But, Henry," she cried, holding out her

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hands to him, " why couldn't I have been told that ? Poor little chap ! "

" Listen, my dear, and you'll understand. John was one of the most lovely children it would be possible to imagine. He was the apple of my father's eye ; my mother worshipped the ground he walked on. One day, when birds'-nesting in a tree, a branch broke, and he fell to the ground. As diabolical luck would have it, he fell in such a way that he became paralysed. Not only that, but he lost the power of speech.

" My parents were heartbroken. Specialist after specialist was brought in, but none of them could do any good. And at last it was left to my old friend here"—he laid his hand on the doctor's shoulder—" to break it to my father that the case was hopeless. There was nothing that could be done. He might partially recover the use of his limbs, but he would be a terrible cripple for life.

" And so my father took a decision, a decision only rendered possible by the help of this other old friend Weston. John died, and was buried in the tomb of his forefathers. That was what the world thought. That was what I thought till I came of age. In reality he was smuggled away into a secret suite of rooms in the wing where I met you that day, Kitty. There, tended by Weston, he has remained ever since, and only we three and my sister knew that the story told to the world was a lie. He has never grown since his fall ; you see him now as he was then.

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"And then, one day shortly after we came back from our honeymoon, Weston came to me with the most disquieting news. So long as he was completely paralysed it was easy to keep the secret. But Weston told me he had seen signs of returning animation. We watched and we waited; the weeks passed by, and the months. And at last we knew the worst: I use that word advisedly. The incredible was happening; John was partially recovering the use not only of his limbs, but also of his vocal cords. You must have heard that terrible noise two or three times lately. And from that moment our vigil has been ceaseless. But not always successful. The night before last he escaped; last night, too, in that thunderstorm he managed in some amazing way to get into the garden. And that, I suppose, proved too much for him, for this morning he died."

For a long space there was silence, and then Kitty went to him.

"But, Henry dear," she said, and there were tears in her voice, "I still can't see the reason for it all. Why couldn't the poor little chap have been put into a nursing home?"

His answer was a strange one: he flashed the torch on to the end of the coffin—

JOHN, VISCOUNT LAVERTON

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"You see," he said quietly, "he was my father's eldest son."



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RONALD STANDISH glanced at the card which his man had just brought in, and raised his eyebrows slightly.

"M. Ivolsky. Agent," he read out. "What on earth can he want with me? However, show him in, Bates."

The new-comer proved to be a dapper little man of about five-and-forty. He was on the plump side, and as he entered he looked from one to the other of us with quick, bird-like glances.

"Sit down, Mr. Ivolsky," said Ronald. "What can I do for you?"

The little man seated himself, and carefully deposited his hat on an adjacent chair. Then, in a voice so curiously high that I smiled involuntarily, he began his story.

"I have come to you, Mr. Standish, on the advice of a friend of mine who I think you know—Mr. Laver, the stockbroker."

"Yes; I know Mr. Laver," said Ronald.

"I was having dinner with him last night," continued our visitor, "and when I told him of the curious—I may say very curious—

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incident, which occurred to me yesterday he suggested that I should consult you about it."

His English was perfect, though he spoke with a faint accent which proclaimed him a foreigner.

"I shall be pleased to hear about it, Mr. Ivolsky," said Ronald, pushing over a box of cigarettes.

"As you can see from my card," he went on as he helped himself, "I am an agent, though perhaps a more accurate description would be to say that I am the London representative of several large Hungarian firms. They work their commissions through me, and that constitutes the bulk of my work. But in addition to that I do a certain amount of buying and selling on my own account in the antique line. I have a small shop not far from Mr. Laver's office, and it was over one or two business dealings that I first made his acquaintance. The shop is run by a manager, and I only come in from my office in the event of some very important deal.

"Yesterday morning, at about eleven o'clock, I was engaged in decoding some cables from Budapest when I heard the sound of voices below in the shop. I thought nothing of it, when somewhat to my surprise, since he knew I did not want to be disturbed, Mr. Hudson, my manager, entered my office with a card in his hand, which he placed on my desk. The name on the card was Mr. Alfred Smithson.

" 'He is downstairs, sir,' said Hudson, 'and

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he is very anxious to see you. In fact he refuses to leave the office until he has.'

" 'What does he want?' I asked irritably.

" 'He won't say anything,' answered Hudson, 'except that it is very important. But . . .'

" He paused with a peculiar look on his face.

" 'What is it?' I cried.

" 'Just this,' said Hudson. 'I'll stake my bottom dollar that he was never christened Smithson. He speaks English perfectly, but he's not an Englishman.'

" 'Tell him I'm engaged,' I said, 'and that I can't see him. He must tell you first what his business is.'

" And at that moment Mr. Smithson walked into the room.

" 'Mr. Ivolsky,' he remarked, 'I am quite aware that this is an impertinence on my part. Nevertheless since it is essential that I should see you, my action is unavoidable.'

" I at once noticed what Hudson meant: the man was not English. But before I could speak he continued:

" 'I shall not detain you for more than ten minutes, and I think I can promise you a fee so substantial that you will find that ten minutes well spent.'

" Well, Mr. Standish, there was nothing for it but to listen. Short of throwing him out—which incidentally would have been quite beyond Hudson's and my power, for he was a great big man—there was no way of getting rid of him. And a substantial fee is a substantial fee wherever it comes from. So I



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told him to sit down, and tell me what he had to say.

" 'Alone, please,' he said, and I signed to Hudson to go back to the shop.

" 'You are a Hungarian, Mr. Ivolsky, are you not?' he began.

" 'I am,' I assured him.

" 'It is a language of which I fear I only know a smattering,' he said. 'And that is the reason of my call here this morning.'

" 'Good Heavens!' I cried, 'you aren't proposing that I should give you lessons in it, are you?'

" 'Hardly that,' he said with a smile. 'Something very much simpler, and which will only take you this afternoon. I trust you are free?'

" 'Before we discuss that,' I answered, 'it would be as well if you told me the object of your visit.'

" 'That is only fair,' he agreed. 'And I will explain the situation in a few words. I am in the middle of a certain business deal with one of your fellow-countrymen. As I have told you, I only speak your language very indifferently, and the negotiations have been conducted up to date by a friend of mine who speaks it well. This has been essential since the Hungarian with whom we are dealing knows no language but his own. Now, at the eleventh hour, when the matter is almost settled, my friend gets involved in a motor accident and is lying in hospital dangerously ill. You see the situation, Mr. Ivolsky. Thus am I unable to continue owing to the fact that neither of us can talk to

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one another. Or, rather, shall I say that I am unable to talk to him: he, poor fellow, is dumb. Would you therefore be prepared to take my friend's place for this afternoon and act as interpreter? Naturally I would not dream of asking you to give up your valuable time without a substantial honorarium. And I suggest that a fee of fifty pounds might prove adequate.'

"Well, Mr. Standish," continued our visitor, "I stared at him. He had spoken plausibly enough, but the whole thing seemed a bit queer.

"'Why didn't you bring the Hungarian here to my office with you?' I asked.

"'He is not in the best of health,' he explained. 'At the moment he is recuperating at my house in the country.'

"'And where may that be?' said I.

"'In Hampshire, not far from Alton. And my idea was that we should motor down together after lunch. The actual business will only take a few minutes, and I can then send you back in the car.'

"'Why did you come to me particularly?' I asked.

"'I happened to see your name in the directory,' he said. 'Come, come, Mr. Ivolsky, it is surely a fairly simple matter to decide. I am offering you a fee of fifty pounds for a few minutes' work and a pleasant drive into the country. If you are unable to accept the commission I must find someone else who will.'

"And put that way it certainly sounded madness to refuse. I had nothing particular

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to do yesterday afternoon, and fifty pounds are not to be sneezed at these hard days. So I accepted, and agreed to meet him at Hyde Park Corner at two o'clock."

"Before you continue, Mr. Ivolsky," said Ronald, "had you formed any opinion as to what nationality this so-called Smithson was?"

"German, perhaps, or Dutch. Possibly Swedish."

"I see. Please go on."

"The drive down was quite uneventful. The car was a big limousine with a liveried chauffeur, and we made very good time. Smithson was not talkative, but once or twice I had the impression that he was watching me covertly out of the corner of his eye. He made no further allusion to the business in hand, and when I tentatively remarked about it he turned it aside with a smile.

"'All in good time, Mr. Ivolsky,' he said. 'I can assure you that you won't find it at all complicated.'

"At about half-past three we arrived. The house was a big one with lodge gates and a long drive, and the first thing that struck me was the shocking condition the whole place was in. The drive was overgrown with weeds; the bushes and trees on each side were nothing but a tangled mass of undergrowth. I suppose he saw me looking, because he made a remark about it.

"'Terrible thing these days having a place of this size to keep up,' he said. 'But gardeners' wages are quite prohibitive.'

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"The house itself was in keeping with the approach. One could see at a glance that there had been no work done on it for years, and I confess, Mr. Standish, that I began to regret having come. But it was too late to draw back then, and so with considerable misgivings I followed my host into the hall.

" 'You won't forget, will you, Mr. Ivolsky,' he said with his hand on a door, 'that the poor fellow is dumb. And he's very sensitive about it. He will just nod or shake his head, as the case may be, in answer to your questions.'

"On that we entered the room, and I took a quick look round. It was most inadequately furnished, with a round table and a few chairs. But there was one unusual feature. Stretched right across it from side to side, and cutting it in half, were heavy black curtains reaching to the ceiling.

"The occupant of the room rose as we came in. He was a middle-aged man with grey hair, and Smithson introduced me to him. His name was Pilaudi, and I greeted him in Hungarian.

" 'Shall we begin?' said Smithson. 'Will you sit here, Mr. Ivolsky?'

"He indicated a chair at the table with its back to the curtains. I sat down and Pilaudi took one opposite me. Then Smithson came and stood beside me.

" 'I think the simplest way,' he said, 'is for me to give you the questions written in English, and for you to translate them. Here is the first.'

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"He laid a piece of paper on the table in front of me ; on it was the following sentence :

" ' Do you realise that what I have is useless without the other ? ' "

"I translated it into Hungarian and watched Pilaudi. For a while he appeared to take no notice, and merely stared vacantly over my head. Then suddenly he nodded, and Smithson put down a second slip :

" ' Will you produce the other ? ' "

"Once again I watched Pilaudi ; once again for an appreciable time he seemed not to have heard what I said. Then he shook his head.

"Came the third slip, this one not a question :

" ' I will pay you the same amount that you can get elsewhere. ' "

"There was no delay this time ; Pilaudi at once shrugged his shoulders, and I looked at the fourth sentence :

" ' I will give you twenty-four hours to think things over. If at the end of that time the other is not forthcoming the result will be fatal. ' "

" ' I glanced at Smithson.

" ' Fatal, ' I said.

" ' Only to our negotiations, ' he remarked.

"So I translated the last sentence, and Pilaudi again shrugged his shoulders immediately.

" ' That is all, thank you, Mr. Ivolsky ' said Smithson. ' And I'm very much obliged to you for your assistance. Here is an envelope containing the sum we agreed on, and the car can take you back to London at once. ' "

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"I rose, and so did Pilaudi. Smithson was already at the door, and since there seemed nothing more for me to do, I shook hands with both of them and got into the waiting car. The whole affair had barely taken five minutes, and it all seemed so bizarre and fanciful that I felt I had been dreaming. I had expected a long and possibly complicated business interview; instead of that, four simple remarks of a most general nature. But the envelope contained ten five-pound notes, and I can safely say I have never earned money more easily."

The little man paused and looked at Ronald and me almost apologetically.

"I really feel quite ashamed to have taken up your time," he said. "All the same, the whole thing was so strange that I couldn't help telling Mr. Laver about it. And when he suggested my coming to you I felt I'd risk it. What do you think, Mr. Standish?"

"In the first place," said Ronald, "I think that a man who can afford to pay fifty pounds for such a trifling service, and cannot afford to keep a gardener, is a peculiar customer. Tell me, Mr. Ivolsky, about this man Pilaudi. Did he strike you as being a Hungarian?"

"I really didn't think much about it at the time. I assumed he was, and there was nothing in his appearance to make one think he wasn't. But what do you mean, Mr. Standish? If he wasn't what was the object of my going down there at all?"

Ronald lit a cigarette thoughtfully and answered the question with another.

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"Did you see anybody else except Smithson and the dumb man?"

"Nobody. Except of course the chauffeur."

"And what impression did the interior of the house give you?"

"Well, I only saw the hall and that one room. But they gave me the impression of extreme discomfort."

"You did not, of course, see what was behind the curtain?"

"No. I did not."

"You realise the significance, Bob, don't you?" he said, turning to me, "of the delay in answering after the two questions, and the prompt reply after the two statements?"

"I can't say that I do," I answered. "He had to think over the questions, whereas the other two remarks were, as you say, statements."

"Possibly. I wonder. You said he was staring over your head, Mr. Ivolsky, when you spoke to him."

"That is so. But what has that to do with it?"

Ronald got up and began to pace up and down the room.

"Let us briefly recapitulate the whole thing at its face value," he said. "A man, posing as an Englishman, comes to Mr. Ivolsky and offers him a big fee to go down to his house in the country. He has a large limousine; a liveried chauffeur, and yet the condition of the house and grounds is one that indicates great poverty. Arrived at the house Mr. Ivolsky meets a dumb

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Hungarian, who is in the throes of an important business deal with the owner of the house. He makes four remarks to him: he sees no servant: he is offered no refreshment. He then returns to London the richer by fifty pounds."

He paused and stared at us.

"It doesn't sound sense to me, you know. Dumb men who are in a position to make big business deals don't travel in foreign countries unattended."

"Well, he was certainly dumb," cried Ivolsky.

"Was he?" said Ronald calmly.

"But if he wasn't, why didn't he answer when I spoke to him?"

"Were you speaking to *him*? That's the point."

He resumed his restless pacing.

"Yes: that's the point. You thought you were: in reality I believe you were speaking to someone you couldn't see, and who was a genuine Hungarian. And I'd lay a small wager that Pilaudi was neither a Hungarian nor dumb. The delay in answering your two questions, of which he, of course, knew the English equivalent, was due to waiting for the reply from the other side of the curtain. And that reply he had to pass on to Smithson."

"But why the mystery?" expostulated our visitor. "Why not take me behind the curtain and let me speak direct?"

"It's when we try to answer that 'why,' Mr. Ivolsky, that the matter becomes more sinister. If I am right: if this so-called Pilaudi



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was merely pretending to be dumb because he realised he'd immediately give himself away if he spoke, then the whole affair assumes a very different complexion."

"I am completely bewildered," said the little man. "Even now I do not quite see what you are driving at, Mr. Standish."

"There are too many glaring inconsistencies in the story you have told us, my dear sir, for it to be the truth. Please don't misunderstand me: I am not suggesting that you have said anything but what actually happened. Why should you? You have no object in wasting my time as well as your own. What I am suggesting is that the whole story of this business deal was a lie from start to finish. That the four remarks you made consisted of two questions, an offer, and a threat. That they were addressed to someone who was behind the curtain out of your sight. And if that is so there arises at once a very unpleasant question. Why did this someone make no sound, and say no word? Why, indeed, was it necessary for him to be hidden at all? And there can be only one answer. He is being held as a prisoner. There may have been half a dozen men behind the curtain with him. Somebody certainly was—the man who passed the answer to the so-called Pilaudi. Yes, Mr. Ivolsky, I'm inclined to think that you have been moving in far deeper waters than you imagined. Could you find this house again?"

"I think I could. In fact, given time, I'm sure I could."

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"That's one up to us anyway. But the point is what we are going to do."

"Would it not be as well to go to Scotland Yard?" said the Hungarian.

"What are we going to say to them? I've told you what I *think*, but I haven't a vestige of proof. Supposing I'm all wrong: supposing Pilaudi really is a dumb Hungarian, and that, incredible though it sounds, the whole story is correct, we should look pretty average fools. We haven't got a single peg to hang our hat on, except that this man Smithson is not an Englishman though he pretends to be one. But having a bogus visiting card printed is not illegal, unless it is used for perpetrating a swindle or obtaining money. And all he has done is to present you with fifty of the best. No one would grant a search warrant on the story we've got to tell. And so if we're going to do anything in the matter we've got to do it ourselves. In other words take the law into our own hands."

Our visitor paled visibly.

"Will not that be very dangerous?" he muttered uneasily.

"Cheer up, Mr. Ivolsky," laughed Ronald. "Your share of the performance will end when you've shown us the house. But twenty-four hours was the time mentioned, and that expires at four o'clock this afternoon. So we haven't got long."

He glanced at his watch.

"'Phone round for the car, Bob, will you? And I expect after all that talking,

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Mr. Ivolsky, you'd like a drink. There's whisky or beer."

"Thank you, I think a small whisky and soda. Tell me, Mr. Standish, what do you propose to do?"

"Have a closer look at the house," said Ronald. "From what you tell me of the condition of the grounds it shouldn't be difficult. And when we have reconnoitred we'll see what we can do next."

"There's going to be an outsize in blots on the copy book," I remarked, "if by any chance the whole thing is genuine."

"Sufficient unto the hour, old boy," said Ronald cheerfully. "You didn't by any chance notice if the house had a name on the gate, Mr. Ivolsky?"

"I specially noticed that it had not," answered the Hungarian. "I looked as we went in, and again when I left."

"A pity. We might have made inquiries locally."

"Here is Seymour with the car," I said. "Are you going to take him?"

Ronald nodded.

"He's quite a good man in a scrap if by chance it comes to it. Take this, Bob: it's better than a gun."

He handed me a loaded stick, and took another himself, whilst our visitor watched the proceedings apprehensively.

"I am beginning to wish, gentlemen," he remarked, "that I had not followed the advice of the excellent Mr. Laver. I trust you will not

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expect me to become involved in—what do you call it—a scrap?”

“You’ll probably lead the vanguard,” said Ronald, smacking him on the back. “Come along, *mes enfants: en voiture*. You come in front with me, Mr. Ivolsky, and tell me the way.”

Which unfortunately was what the little man proved unable to do. Arrived at Alton the direction had to be left to him, and it soon became obvious that he was completely at fault.

“And I could have sworn,” he cried almost tearfully, “that I could have led you straight to the house. But your roads to me they all look the same.”

“Take it easy, Mr. Ivolsky,” said Ronald soothingly. “You’re sure at any rate that you came through Alton? Good. And that the house was two or three miles beyond? Right. Then all we can do is to try them one by one.”

He spoke quite quietly but I could tell he was seething with impatience. Time was valuable, and to waste it motoring up and down country lanes was infuriating. For it was not till the third attempt that the Hungarian gave a sudden shout of triumph.

“That cottage! I recognise it. We are right this time, Mr. Standish. The house is about a mile farther on.”

And the time was a quarter to four.

“What are you going to do with the car, Ronald?” I asked.

“Drive past the gates, and leave it in the

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road. Then you and I, Bob, will walk in. The lodge is still presumably empty, but we can see that as we go past."

"There it is," cried Ivolsky, pointing ahead, and Ronald slowed down.

"Shutters up," he remarked as we drove by. "No danger to be anticipated there. Now, Mr. Ivolsky, I want you to stay here with my chauffeur. You can do no good with us, and if we want you we'll know where to find you. Come along, Bob: there's no time to lose."

The drive had a bend in it, so that for the first two hundred yards the house could not be seen, and we were able to get along without taking to the undergrowth. And assuredly the little Hungarian had not exaggerated in his description of the condition of the place. It did not look as if a hand's turn of work had been done on it for years, and when, before reaching the bend, we had to take cover it was almost a question of hacking one's way through.

"Let's hope they're occupied indoors," said Ronald. "We're making enough noise to waken the dead."

And then suddenly he stopped abruptly, his hand raised in warning. We had arrived at the edge: in front of us stood the house. I wormed my way cautiously forward: then side by side we crouched down staring at it. To all appearances the place was deserted. The windows were shut, and so was the front door. Dusty ivy trailed drunkenly down the walls: the whole place was dilapidated to a degree.

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"That settles it, Bob," said Ronald. "Smithson was certainly lying when he said this was his country house, and so the whole story he told Ivolsky was a plant. But it looks remarkably as if the birds had flown, and that we're too late."

"Shall we have a closer look now that we are here?" I remarked.

"I was just going to suggest it," he said. "And if by chance there is anybody at home we've come to look over the property."

He stepped out on to the grass verge bordering the drive, and walked boldly up to the front door. The question of concealment no longer came into it: we were two bona fide prospective tenants. The iron bell pull was old and rusty, and stuck when he tried to use it. Then it went with a jerk, and the reverberation of the bell could have been heard in Alton.

Gradually it died away, and we listened intently. No sound came from the house: the place might have been a tomb.

"They've gone, Bob," said Ronald. "We're wasting our time. Hallo! the door is not locked. That's strange."

He pushed it open, and we stepped into the hall. The unpleasant musty odour of a long disused house at once assailed our nostrils: dust lay thick everywhere and Ronald's keen eye searched it for footprints.

"Five people at least," he remarked, "have been here recently. And that room on our right is obviously where our little friend did his interpreter stuff. There are the curtains now

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pulled back: there's the table. Let's see if we can find anything in the part of the room that was shut off."

We walked through and suddenly Ronald halted staring at the floor.

"Bad, Bob: very bad," he muttered. "Blood, and recent blood. It's not even dry. And look at that coil of rope in the corner. There's been devilry here. Good God! What's this?"

He bent down and picked up a strange looking metal implement, which was stained a bright crimson.

"I am beginning to feel a strong desire to meet Mr. Alfred Smithson," he said quietly. "This, unless I am much mistaken, is a form of thumb screw. They've been torturing the wretched fellow. Come on, Bob: this is very definitely a police job."

He was standing by the door taking a final look round the hall. And suddenly he gripped my arm.

"Look at the stairs, Bob: look at the stairs," he muttered. "One set of footprints, only."

"What of it?" I said.

"They go up, man: and they don't come down. Get hold of that coil of rope: the police will have to wait. There is someone upstairs."

On tiptoe we crept up, and as we reached the top we heard it. Rising and falling there came from a room in front of us an ever swelling cadence of snores. The door was open, and we peered in. And a strange sight met our eyes.

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In one corner lay the motionless body of a man : in another, sprawling on a pile of old sacks was one of the drunkest individuals I have ever seen in my life. The room reeked of whisky, and an empty bottle was on the floor beside him. So drunk was he that he never stirred when we lashed his arms and legs : then we turned our attention to his companion.

"The swine," muttered Ronald savagely. "Look at his thumb. However, he's alive, though they've doped him. See if you can find a bucket of water, Bob, and we'll see what we can get out of this drunken sot."

I found one in the back premises, but it was not until the third application that his eyes opened and he stared at us.

"Wot the 'ell," he began thickly ; then he realised he was bound. And with the realisation the drink died out of him and fear came.

"Strike me pink, guv'nor," he quavered, "'oo are yer ? Wot 'ave yer got me trussed up like this for ? I ain't done no 'arm."

"That's what we want to find out," snapped Ronald. "Where are the other men who have been in this house ?"

"Gone aht, guv'nor : gone aht two hours ago."

"Where have they gone to ?"

"I dunno, guv'nor : strite I don't. But they're coming back."

"They are, are they ? You're sure of that ?"

"Sure as I'm a'lying 'ere."

"Who are these men ?"



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" I dunno, guv'nor. They're furriners though they speaks English : that's all I can tell yer abaht them."

" Is one of them dumb ? "

" Dumb. Gaw lumme—no."

" What about this poor devil here ? How did that happen to his thumb ? "

" It wasn't me, guv'nor : I swears it. It was them other two wot did it."

" While you looked on and cheered. Why did they do it ? "

" They was trying to make 'im give them something. You see, guv'nor, they couldn't speak 'is langwidge. That's why a bloke came dahn from London yesterday."

" I know all about that. So having tortured him, they then doped him, and you carried him upstairs."

The man's odious little eyes shifted uneasily.

" That's right, guv'nor, though I dunno 'ow you knows."

" What orders did they give you when they left ? "

" To wait 'ere with 'im, guv'nor, till they comes back."

" Did they say what time they'd be back ? "

" Didn't give no time, guv'nor. Just said wait 'ere. Can't yer let me aht now ? " he whined. " I've got the cramp, I 'ave."

" Delighted to hear it," said Ronald. " Long may it continue. So we were right, Bob," he continued. " I'm inclined to think that this beauty is speaking the truth, and that he is merely in on this as a guard. The people we

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want are the other two. Is there a cellar or some place downstairs where we can put him ? ”

“ There are some outhouses,” I answered.

“ That’ll do.”

He unlashed the man’s legs.

“ Get up, you swine. And don’t try any funny stuff, or you’ll have a taste of that thumb screw yourself. Bob, you lead the way.”

It was beginning to get dark as we took him across to the stables. And there having relashed his legs, and dumped him in a loose box we locked him in.

“ Now for that other poor bloke,” said Ronald, and even as he spoke there came the sound of wheels on the drive.

“ By jove ! Bob,” he muttered, “ they’re back already. Keep out of sight while I reconnoitre.”

He faded into the gathering dusk, and I crept after him keeping in the shadow of the house. By the front door an empty car was standing, and suddenly I saw Ronald approaching it on hands and knees. Came the hiss of escaping air repeated twice, and then after an interval twice again.

“ I’ve punctured all four of their tyres,” he chuckled as he rejoined me. “ Which will make ’em cough a bit. I wonder how many there are of them.”

From inside the house a man’s voice could be heard shouting “ Carter ” furiously : evidently our drunken acquaintance was wanted. And then a lamp was lit in the room with the curtains.

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"By God! Bob," muttered Ronald as a man came to the window and looked out, "this is big stuff. That's Baron von Huyter—the most unscrupulous of all the European agents. And he's a gentleman who doesn't hesitate to shoot."

Another man joined him, elderly and grey-haired—obviously the dumb Pilaudi. And a moment later two men, one of whom was the chauffeur, appeared carrying the unconscious Hungarian.

"Dump him there," snarled von Huyter. "Now then, you." He turned on Pilaudi. "How long will it take to bring him round?"

"Five minutes," answered the other, and Ronald gripped my arm.

"Sprint like hell, Bob, and tell Seymour to go for the police. Then come back here."

When I returned Pilaudi was bending over the Hungarian doing something with a hypodermic syringe.

"He's not recovered yet," whispered Ronald, "but they'll torture him again when he does. We've got to stop 'em somehow, Bob. And quickly," he added, "he's conscious."

The wretched man was sitting up staring round the room dazedly. And then he saw von Huyter and shrank back in terror.

"Don't you want the interpreter again, Mr. Smithson?" sang out Ronald, and the German swung round as if he had been shot. "He'll be here soon with the police."

Like a flash von Huyter blew out the lamp, and we heard his muttered orders.

"Into the car—all of you. Lift him in."

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And Ronald laughed softly.

Came the whirr of the self-starter as the chauffeur leapt into the driving seat. And then came the other three half carrying, half pushing their prisoner.

"Police," roared Ronald.

"Here we are," I shouted back.

Bump—bump—bump : the car had started. Often has one heard it with one punctured tyre : rarely, I imagine, with four. And to the accompaniment of hideous blasphemy from von Huyter the car stopped.

"Police," yelled Ronald again, and this time it worked the oracle. Doors were flung open : the occupants of the car dashed out and bolted, leaving their prisoner behind. And when the last footsteps had died away down the drive Ronald laughed again.

"Which settles Baron von Huyter's hash," he remarked. "A word to Scotland Yard will not be wasted. Let's go and see if we can do anything for that poor devil."

\* \* \* \* \*

But it was not to be, and the true story will never be known. For the Hungarian relapsed into unconsciousness again, and remained in that condition till he died two days later. They had overdosed him, and his secret died with him. Months after it transpired that he was an inventor who had specialised in aeronautics, and that he claimed to have discovered something which would revolutionise flying and

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which he wished to sell to the British Government.

But how von Huyter got him in his clutches : how, unknown to the agents, he had obtained possession of an empty house will for ever be a mystery. Only von Huyter could have explained it, and his body was washed up on the Belgian coast a week later with fragments of wreckage of an aeroplane. Or the "dumb" Pilaudi. But his body was never found, though a grey-haired elderly man left Weston aerodrome with the Baron.

## 12

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"GOOD afternoon, Colonel. Been shooting anybody lately?"

A choleric-looking little red-faced man swung round and grinned cheerfully when he saw Ronald Standish.

"Hallo! my boy," he said. "Glad to see you again. How's the golf?"

"Not too bad," answered Ronald, which in view of the fact that he had just been round in seventy-one hardly seemed an overstatement. "The course is in grand condition. By the way, you don't know Bob Leyton, do you? Colonel Fortescue."

We shook hands, and having had one for the road, we all left the club house together.

"Are you staying at the dormy house?" inquired the colonel. "If so, there's no good my offering you a lift."

"None, thanks," said Ronald. "We must have a game some day soon."

"Not on your life, my dear boy," chuckled the old man. "I've got to the age now when I like my opponents to have double-figure handicaps. But I insist on your both coming

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to have a bit of dinner with me. I've still got a few bottles of the old Cockburn left."

He paused suddenly, one foot on the running-board.

"Good Lord! I hadn't thought of that." He was frowning to himself. "I don't think he would object to your knowing. Look here, Standish, there's something which might be in your line going on down here. It concerns a neighbour of mine, and naturally, I can't tell you about it without his consent."

"Sounds mysterious," said Ronald lightly.

"It is. Deuced mysterious. It's the sort of thing one reads about in books. Now can you both dine to-morrow night? If so, I'll get hold of Marbury—he's the man concerned—and I'll persuade him to tell you."

"Seems good to me, Colonel. And I'm sure Bob is on."

"Excellent. Eight o'clock. Short coat, of course. Just the four of us."

"One of the characters of Slindon-on-Sea, Bob," said Ronald, as the little man drove off. "But I've never heard of Marbury. He must be a new-comer."

"What lay behind your remark to the old boy about shooting people?" I asked.

"It's a fact," said Ronald, lighting a cigarette. "And since we're dining there I'll tell you about it. As you see, he's a man of about seventy, and he's lived here ever since he retired from the army. He's unmarried, and provided you can keep him off the Swetty-pore in 'ninety-four tack, he's extremely good

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company. He's got a lot of money, and a charming house about half a mile from the links.

"To come, however, to the gun-work. The family have always been soldiers, and old Fortescue's grandfather held some high command in India, in the year dot. And though it is advisable not to go too closely into the matter, the bald fact remains that when he returned to England he brought with him a collection of precious stones of immense value. That collection was passed on intact, and is now in this old chap's possession."

"Have you seen it?" I asked.

"I have. He showed it to me the last time I was down here."

"Does he keep it in his house?"

"You're getting warm, Bob. He does. He's been told a score of times that he's a damned fool for doing so, but he's as pig-headed as a mule on that one point. He keeps it in his smoking-room, but no one knows where. He's got some secret hiding-place installed in that room, which nobody has ever been allowed to find. If he wants to get his collection he'll go and shut himself in there, and then bring it to another room. Even his confidential servant, who has been with him since his Service days, has no idea where it is. But you could hardly expect a trifle of that sort to put off a burglar. And it was over that that the shooting took place.

"A man broke in, and the colonel heard him. He came rushing down the stairs with a twelve-bore, and he peppered this fellow in the seat



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of his pants so badly that the man was in hospital for weeks. In fact, it was touch and go whether he would pull through or not. And burglar or no burglar, it would have been awkward for Fortescue if he'd killed him. The general feeling at the time was that it's not fair to have things of such value in an ordinary house which a child could break into. Like leaving your money about; it's just putting temptation in people's way. However, even that didn't budge him; the stones are still there, and if you want to see 'em, he'll be only too delighted to show them to you to-morrow night."

"Presumably we shall be occupied in listening to Mr. Marbury's troubles."

"I'd forgotten about him. John."

He beckoned to the dormy-house steward.

"Do you know anything of a Mr. Marbury who has come here to live?"

"Very little, sir. He plays a good deal of golf with Colonel Fortescue, and he came to Slindon about six months ago. Their houses are next to one another. A pleasant spoken gentleman, sir, of fifty or so."

Which proved to be a very just description of the man. He was there when we arrived, genial, stoutish, grey-haired, and while we sipped our sherry I found myself wondering what mystery it could be that had come within his orbit. But no allusion was made to it until Dyer, the taciturn manservant, had placed the port before the colonel and withdrawn. Then our host brought the subject up.

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"I've been telling Marbury about you, Standish," he said, "and I've persuaded him to put the whole story in front of you. My own candid opinion is that he's a fool not to go to the police about it, but that's his affair."

"Told in cold blood, Mr. Standish," began Marbury, "the thing seems so fantastic as to be ludicrous, I'm afraid. But I can assure you it's beginning to get on my nerves. To begin at the beginning, then, I came to live here just five months ago. I'm a retired business man, and my idea was to enjoy what years are left to me pottering in my garden and playing a little mild golf. Most fortunately, the house next door here was vacant, and when I found that my neighbour the colonel was also keen on those pursuits I considered myself very lucky. I like the locality, and when I managed to get hold of a very respectable man and his wife to look after me I felt that Fate had treated me kindly. And then out of the blue, about a month ago, there fell the thunderbolt.

"Glancing through my letters on the breakfast table I saw one with a typewritten envelope. It was addressed to Henry Marbury, without the customary Esquire, and assuming it was a bill I left it till last to open. A bill!" He gave a short laugh. "Would to heaven it had been. A demand for ten thousand pounds would have been preferable."

He leaned forward in his chair, and I noticed his hand was shaking.

"Inside that envelope, Mr. Standish," he continued, "was a sheet of single paper. On

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that paper was written a single sentence. And that sentence was as follows: 'You have thirty days to live.' "

Ronald sat up with a jerk.

"Good God!" he said. "What an amazing thing. Have you the letter on you?"

Marbury laughed mirthlessly.

"I have twenty-seven letters on me. The following morning, Mr. Standish, an identical envelope arrived. This time the message inside was more laconic. Just one number—'29.' The next day it was '28.' This morning it was '4.' "

Ronald, his cigar still unlighted, stared at him.

"You have had a letter every day?" he asked.

"Except Sundays, when there is no delivery. Two have arrived together on the Monday."

"And the postmarks on the envelope?"

"Always London."

"Have you these letters with you?"

Henry Marbury extracted a bundle from his pocket and handed it over the table. Then we waited in silence while Ronald examined the contents.

"This is the most extraordinary affair, Mr. Marbury," he said at length. "May I ask if you have the faintest idea as to who could be the sender? Have you any enemy who would be likely to do such a thing?"

"Few men who have reached my time of life, and been, if I may say so, successful financially, can say they have no enemies. But there is no

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man living, to my knowledge, who dislikes me enough to murder me."

"That's the whole point," cut in our host. "Is this a serious threat, Standish, or is it a damned silly hoax?"

"Precisely," said Ronald. "As you say, that is the whole point. And if it is a hoax the perpetrator of it should be flogged, for a more wicked one could scarcely be conceived. I understand, Mr. Marbury, that you have said nothing to the police about it?"

"I have not. The only man that I've mentioned it to until this moment is the colonel. The way I look at it, Mr. Standish, is this. What good can the police do? To trace the sender of a typewritten letter posted somewhere in London is beyond anyone's power. The paper is quite ordinary, and I can give them no hint or assistance of any kind as to a possible writer. Whichever it is, a serious threat or a hoax, the police are equally powerless, and in the event of it being the latter I shall be made to look a perfect laughing stock."

"There is a lot in what you say," agreed Ronald. "What are you proposing to do?"

"To-day, Mr. Standish, is Friday. So next Tuesday is the fatal day. Once that is over the question as to whether it is a hoax or not will have been answered. And on Tuesday the colonel has promised to stand by me the whole day."

"Trust me, Marbury," barked our host. "We'll play golf morning and afternoon. Damme, I'll break my invariable rule and

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lunch at the club. And if the port kills you, my boy, I'll die by your side. Probably that's at the bottom of it all. Have you ever drunk the club port, Standish?"

Ronald smiled politely, but I could see he hardly had heard the old man's well-meant badinage.

"I think that's a very good idea, Mr. Marbury," he said. "And with your permission we'll make it a foursome. And then we'll come back here, or else to your house and see midnight over together."

"Have to be yours, Marbury," said the colonel. "Tuesday is Dyer's annual beanfeast. It was fixed six weeks ago. He says it is a reunion dinner in London: my own belief is that the dirty dog is lying through his back teeth."

"I cannot say how grateful I am to you, Mr. Standish," said Marbury quietly. "I try to persuade myself that it is some stupid hoax, but those inexorable letters turning up every day tend to shake one's nerve."

"I can well believe it," answered Ronald. "They would shake anybody's. By the way, Mr. Marbury, might I ask what your business was before you retired?"

The other raised his eyebrows as if a little surprised at the question.

"I was in the hardware line up in the North country," he answered. "But I can assure you," he added with a smile, "that my goods were not sufficiently bad to account for this business."

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We all laughed, and the colonel pushed back his chair.

"Let's forget it," he said. "How about a rubber of bridge?"

It was after midnight when we left and we dropped Marbury at his front gate.

"It's only three now," he said. "Tell me the truth, Mr. Standish," he went on, with a note of desperation in his voice, "I'd sooner know it. What *do* you think? Is this a hoax or is it not?"

"Whichever it is," answered Ronald reassuringly, "I'm sure of one thing. You need not worry about it until Tuesday. And then you'll have three vigilant guards with you. Good night, Mr. Marbury. I advise you to do what the colonel said. Try and forget it till then."

"Easier said than done," I remarked, as we drove away. "It really is the most extraordinary thing I've ever heard of."

"Most," agreed Ronald absently. "You'll have to get someone to take my place in that four-ball to-morrow, Bob. I'm going up to London."

"To London," I cried. "On a Saturday! What on earth for?"

"To see if I can find the sender of those letters," he answered.

"A pretty tall job," I remarked. "Are you serious?"

"Perfectly," he said. "Did anything strike you particularly about Marbury?"

He ran the car into the garage and switched off the lights.

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"I can't say that it did," I answered, as we strolled back to the dormy house. "I was so interested in his story that I didn't pay much attention to the man himself. What are you alluding to?"

"His hands," said Ronald. "Always look at a man's hands, Bob: they're a much more reliable guide than his face."

"What did you learn from them?" I asked curiously.

"That he hasn't spent the whole of his life sitting at a desk in a hardware store. Mr. Marbury has done more than his fair share of manual labour during his time."

"What of it?" I said.

"Perhaps nothing; perhaps a lot." I had followed him into his room. "I have a notion, Bob, that Tuesday is going to be an entertaining day."

"You are an irritating devil," I cried. "Why can't you be more explicit?"

"Because I don't know myself," he answered gravely, as he emptied his pockets and took off his coat. "But if my vague guess is correct I think our friend may require all the assistance he can get."

"You definitely think it is not a hoax?"

"Definitely. Further, I think that in spite of what he said, Marbury knows it isn't, too."

"Then why hasn't he gone to the police?"

"Precisely. Why? You puzzle it out for yourself. Don't touch that card, I beg of you."

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I was staring in amazement at one of the playing cards we had used that night, which was lying on his dressing-table.

"What on earth have you pinched that for?" I cried.

"Bob, old boy," he said kindly, "the hour grows late. That keen and scintillating brain of yours is not at its best. Good night; and may angels watch round your little bed."

Ronald caught an early train and I had lunch at the club-house. Try as I would I could not get the strange story we had heard overnight out of my head. Neither the colonel or Marbury was there, and I sat with the secretary, a retired naval officer called Gamage. It was impossible, of course, to mention the story—to do so would have been a breach of confidence—but I brought the conversation round to the teller.

"Dined with old Fortescue last night," I said. "A man named Marbury was there. New-comer, isn't he?"

"Yes," answered Gamage. "Only been here a few months. Quite a nice fellow: he and the colonel have become great friends."

"Standish was telling me some yarn about the old man nearly killing a burglar," I said.

Gamage laughed and lit a cigarette.

"It's a fact. He did. And though I laughed when you mentioned it, it was no laughing matter at the time. He's a very rum-tempered old blighter, you know; he's apt to go off at half-cock at any moment. And it's mighty lucky for him that that man of his, Dyer, puts



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up with him. He's never been able to keep another servant for more than a few weeks."

"Does Dyer do the whole work of the house, then?"

"Practically. A woman comes in in the morning, I believe. The old colonel hates the sight of the whole sex. At least, he always swears he does. He was badly let down in his young days, I gather."

"I shouldn't think he's everybody's cup of tea," I said idly.

"My dear fellow," chuckled Gamage, "at one time or another he has insulted every member of this club either singly, in pairs, or in droves. And if there's no one else I am the invariable stand-by. He resigns regularly once a month, and one of these days he'll get the shock of his life. The committee will take him at his word. Did you think that was a bad lunch?"

"Very good. Why?"

"If old Fortescue had eaten it he'd have described the mutton as shoe leather, the vegetables as garbage, the beer as undrinkable, and the port as poison. But everyone likes the old boy really, though he swindles in the most bare-faced manner at golf. It's a standing jest. He'll tee up his ball in a bunker without a blush. And he becomes apoplectic if anyone says anything about it. In fact, it really was getting beyond a joke. Everybody was refusing to play with him, and if he got hold of an unwary stranger it gave the club such a damned bad name. So it was very fortunate when Marbury

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came along, for he doesn't seem to mind. Incidentally, here they both are. Afternoon, Colonel. Afternoon, Mr. Marbury."

"You've got to sack the caddie master, Gamage," cried the colonel. "Will you believe it, I've just been round to get two. The place is crawling with the little brutes, and the blithering idiot tells me they're all engaged. Preposterous."

"Saturday afternoon, Colonel," said Gamage mildly. "And there's a match on into the bargain."

The irate old gentleman stumped away, breathing fire and blood, and Marbury gave me the faintest signal to follow him into a corner.

"I thought you might like to see it," he said wearily, showing me a piece of paper with a "3" on it. "Heavens, Mr. Leyton, I'll be glad when Tuesday is over one way or—the other. Where is Mr. Standish?"

"He had to go up to London most unexpectedly," I said, following Ronald's instructions. "He'll be back again to-night."

"He won't let me down, will he?" he cried anxiously. "He'll be here on Tuesday?"

"I can promise you he will," I assured him. "He was most annoyed at having to go at all."

Marbury was lighting a small cigar, and with Ronald's words in mind I studied his hands covertly. Now that my attention had been drawn to it I at once saw what Ronald meant. In one respect they were well shaped. But the skin was rough and calloused; the nails were

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short and had evidently been uncared-for in the past. And suddenly I became aware that their owner had his eyes fixed on me.

"Relics of my early days in Australia, Mr. Leyton," he said quietly, and I almost blushed. To have been caught so blatantly was most embarrassing.

"A country I have always wanted to go to," I murmured fatuously. "Are you playing this afternoon?"

"Only if Colonel Fortescue can get a caddie," he answered. "He won't play without one, though I have no objections to doing so."

He spoke casually enough, and yet I know he was studying me; knew, too, that he was annoyed. Clearly a matter he was touchy about: it was stupid of me to have been found out. I was glad when my opponent appeared and we started out.

I did not see either the colonel nor Marbury on my return, but Ronald was propping up the bar.

"You're back earlier than I expected," I cried. "What luck?"

"Excellent," he answered. "Though quite different from what I anticipated."

"You mean you've found the writer of the letters?"

"I have."

"And have you told Marbury?"

"No. I think it is very much better to let events take their normal course. Marbury will be amply protected; no harm will come to him. And we shall catch the other sportsman

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in the act. Whereas if Marbury knew, he wouldn't be able to go through his part. He'd be sure to give the show away, and the attempt would not be made."

"I see," I remarked. And then I asked him how on earth he had found the man. "It's amazing," I said. "I don't see what you had to go on. Is he an Australian?"

"An Australian!" Ronald stared at me in astonishment. "Why under the sun should he be an Australian?"

"At any rate, it was something to do with Marbury's hands," I said.

"It is possible, Bob, that you know what you're talking about, but I don't."

"Only one thing. Marbury's hands, so he told me, are the result of his early days in Australia."

"Indeed! Did he volunteer the information?"

"More or less."

"What do you mean by more or less? Did he catch you staring at his hands?"

"Er—well," I said a little guiltily, "I suppose he did."

"Really, Bob," he said at length, "there are times when you ought to be attended by a nursemaid. This, believe me, is one of them. I go out of my way last night to explain to you that Marbury's hands are the crux of the situation. Your next act is to study them through a magnifying glass! I am not partial to strong language, Bob; but I here and now inform you that you're a damn fool."

"Confound it all, man," I cried. "I'm sorry."

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I didn't know. But it's very largely your own fault. You're so cursedly secretive."

He laughed suddenly.

"Sorry, Bob ; I apologise. Let's hope there's no harm done. How went the game this afternoon ? "

But I was not to be so easily mollified, and I regret to say that my only answer was to tell him to go to hell. After all, how *could* I be expected to know that sort of thing if Ronald did not tell me ? He always seemed to think that because he had certain information in his possession, other people must have it too. But after a while I could no longer stifle the uneasy conviction that he had been justified in what he had said. My own feeling of embarrassment at the time when Marbury caught me in the act, so to speak, was in itself a proof that I had done a very foolish thing. But it could not be undone, and so the only thing to do was to hope for the best.

On Sunday nothing happened of note ; on Monday Marbury showed us at the club-house the two letters that had arrived that morning—" 2 " and " 1."

"And to-morrow " o. " he said grimly. " I'm staying at the dormy house to-night ; I daren't face my own house. Cowardly, I suppose ; but my nerve has gone."

"As a matter of fact I was going to suggest that you should," said Ronald. " I think it very much wiser from every point of view. There's not much sense in forming a body-guard for you from nine in the morning till

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midnight and neglecting the rest of the twenty-four hours. Further, I'd bolt your window and lock your door."

And so the dreaded morning dawned. I was awake early, conscious of a tingling sense of excitement. All my attempts overnight to pump Ronald had proved futile; the utmost he would say was that he had taken every possible precaution and that I should know in good time.

I got down soon after eight to find that Marbury was there before me. He was going through the pretence of eating some breakfast, but his hand was shaking so badly that he could hardly lift his cup to his mouth. And I could not blame the poor devil.

"I didn't sleep a wink," he said, and I nodded sympathetically.

"If you take my advice, Mr. Marbury," I said, "you'll have a large whisky and soda. I know it's a bit early, but I think it is excusable to-day."

"Hear, hear," remarked Ronald, who had come in and overheard. "It won't do you any harm at all. Any letter this morning?"

"It's probably at my house," said Marbury. "That's to say, if he's thought it necessary to send one at all to-day."

At nine-thirty we walked to the clubhouse, with Marbury peering fearfully over his shoulder at every step he took. At nine-forty-five the colonel arrived, and I noticed a suspicious bulge in his hip pocket.

"Pray heaven," muttered Ronald anxiously

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to me, "that the old gentleman doesn't discharge his lethal weapon at some completely harmless stranger. There is always the possibility that he might hit him."

At ten we started out, and that round will live in my memory for all time. Marbury played a shocking game, but it was the colonel who was the most trying. He was just like a child playing Red Indians. Every bunker held a possible murderer; every bush concealed an assassin. In fact, I could hardly help laughing in spite of the gravity of the situation. Only Ronald seemed quite unperturbed, and played his normal game.

At length that nightmare round was over, and we returned to the clubhouse.

"Now then," said Ronald cheerfully, "sherry? Gin and French? What's the matter, Mr. Marbury?"

"The steward has just given me this," he answered. "It has come, you see. Delivered by hand."

It was the usual letter, marked with the fatal "O."

"Who delivered this, steward?" said Ronald.

"A small boy gave it to one of the waitresses, sir. About half an hour ago."

"So it means he's in the neighbourhood," muttered Marbury. "And it means it isn't a hoax. O God, what shall I do?"

"Have a drink," said Ronald prosaically. "Cheer up, Mr. Marbury; we're not going to desert you."

But the poor devil was beside himself with

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fear ; every time the door opened he started like a nervous cat. And it soon became obvious that golf that afternoon would be out of the question. He could hardly hold his glass, much less a club. So, to my great relief, the idea of it was abandoned ; anything would be better than a repetition of the morning.

We dawdled through a miserable meal, at which only the greatest tact on Ronald's part prevented the colonel putting his revolver on the table. Mercifully there were very few members lunching, because Marbury's condition of nerves was obvious. And then for an interminable hour we sat outside pretending to read the papers. At a quarter past three Ronald was called to the telephone ; at half-past he suggested we should go back to Marbury's house.

"We can't go on sitting here the whole afternoon," he pointed out. "And if anything, you'll be safer there, Mr. Marbury."

So to his house we went. And the first thing we saw as we entered was a man's hat and stick lying on a chair.

"Whose hat is that ?" yelled Marbury, and as if in answer there appeared, to my surprise, the well-known figure of Inspector McIver.

"Good afternoon, Dick," he said genially. "I'll bet you didn't expect to find me here. At Mr. Standish's request I've come specially to guard you."

"Dick !" spluttered the colonel. "His name is not Dick. And who are you, anyway ?"

"Inspector McIver of Scotland Yard, sir.



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A rose by any other name, you know. And to me he is always Dick."

I glanced at Marbury: his mouth was opening and shutting like that of a codfish. And then the inspector continued:

"A very pretty scheme, Dick. Honestly, I congratulate you on it most heartily. It's sheer bad luck that you should have told the story to Mr. Standish of all people."

"What the devil is the fool talking about?" howled the colonel.

"Are you Colonel Fortescue, sir?" asked McIver politely.

"I am."

"You have, I believe, a very valuable collection of jewels."

And from Marbury's lips there floated one crisp "Damn."

"What of it?" barked the colonel.

"Only that I have it here."

McIver was holding a chamois leather bag in his hand, and for a moment I feared the old soldier was going to have an apoplectic fit.

"You scoundrel," he shouted. "How did you get hold of that?"

"Come, come, Colonel," said Ronald with a smile, "that is hardly the way to speak to a distinguished officer from Scotland Yard, who is returning your stolen property to you."

And once again from Marbury's very soul there came a weary "Damn."

"Well, Dick," said McIver, "we might as well be getting along. Pete is waiting for you

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at the station, and I want to be getting back to London."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm defeated, Standish: absolutely defeated. How on earth did you spot the scoundrel?"

We had adjourned to the colonel's house, after having broken the sad news to Marbury's servants that their wages were a very problematical asset.

"It's my job to notice small things, Colonel," said Ronald, "and in this case, as I told Bob, it was his hands. I noticed them that night when he dined here, and though, of course, I couldn't be sure, they struck me as not being what I would expect in a retired business man. And that, coupled with the fact that he had not informed the police of these threatening letters, as ninety-nine men in a hundred would do if their consciences were clear, made me wonder if Mr. Marbury was telling us all he knew. A hardware business in the Midlands! Very vague, you know, and impossible to verify.

"So before leaving I obtained his fingerprints on one of your playing cards—you'll find the ace of spades is deficient from one of your packs—and on Saturday I went to Scotland Yard. What I believed was this. I thought that Marbury had spent a considerable portion of his time, not as he told Bob in Australia, but at His Majesty's expense in England."

"That he was an ex-convict," cried the colonel.

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"Exactly. And I thought the writer of the letters was some other old lag he had fallen foul of. In short, when I went to London all that I was accusing Marbury of in my own mind was that he had been in prison and that he was not telling us all he knew about the letters.

"The real truth had not dawned on me. It did not until we identified the gentleman, which was not difficult. He was none other than Dick Turner, a burglar right at the top of his profession. He generally worked with a man called Pete Simpson, and they had come out of Dartmoor a year ago. So far as the police knew, the two men had not quarrelled, and were running straight. Which put a different complexion on matters. What was Dick Turner doing down here posing as Henry Marbury? The answer stuck out a mile—your jewels. And the whole plot was clear. Moreover, as McIver said, it was a very pretty scheme—the prettiest I honestly believe I've ever come across.

"Turner came here to spy out the land. He was a public school man and went down with the locals all right. You yourself asked him to dinner frequently. But he soon discovered one or two uncomfortable snags about the business. The first was your penchant, if I may so, Colonel, for letting drive at intruders with a shotgun. The second was Dyer, a large and powerful man who rarely left the house. It was an impasse, but they could afford to wait. And at last came their chance—Dyer's reunion dinner, the

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date for which was fixed six weeks ago. They knew that unless something unforeseen occurred Dyer would be in London to-day and to-night. So that only you remained, and their problem was how to get you out of the house for at least four or five hours to enable Pete Simpson to have undisturbed possession of your smoking-room for that time.

"The scheme they evolved we know. And but for my long shot it would have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. Pete Simpson would by this time have been well on his way to London with your collection of precious stones. You would still be sitting in Marbury's house with a revolver in each hand and the light of battle in your eye. And to-morrow I venture to guess that Marbury would have received another note concluding the series, and couched something as follows :

" ' I swore I'd pay you out, and I have. We'll cry quits. '

" And in a few weeks' time, I venture further to guess, Marbury would have found some good excuse for folding up his tent and fading gently away from the neighbourhood. "

" And I might not have discovered the theft for a month, " cried the colonel.

" Precisely. By which time the jewels would have long been out of the country. As it is they're back in your hiding-place. But you'll have to find another one, Colonel. McIver, who watched the whole show from

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his hiding-place in the garden, told me when he telephoned through to the club that it took Pete one minute to find it and half a minute to get it open."



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